

## CT is one of 13 states with no agency to serve deaf community. There is a powerful demand for change.



Luisa Gasco-Soboleski (right), the president of the Connecticut Association of the Deaf, signs at a press conference at the Legislative Office Building Tuesday as House Speaker Matt Ritter, Rep. Jillian Gilchrest and Rep. Chris Poulos look on.

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In 1974, Connecticut made history when it launched [the first state agency](#) dedicated to [serving the Deaf community](#). Now Connecticut is one of just 13 states without one. A new proposal to establish a Bureau of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Services seeks to change that.

According to Deaf leaders and advocates in the state, gaps in the system have led to the privatization and displacement of communication and advocacy services, exposing the community to vulnerability as they navigate the state's health care, workforce and education systems largely on their own.

A proposal for a new bureau would centralize services for the Deaf community, eliminate barriers and advance access to state resources. House Speaker Matt Ritter said it ranks within the top five priorities for Democrats this legislative session.

Ritter and Reps. Jillian Gilchrest and Chris Poulos unveiled their proposal in a press conference alongside members of the Connecticut Association of the Deaf at the state's Legislative Office Building Tuesday.

The plan, which comes at a cost of roughly \$250,000 each year, would build out the bureau under the Department of Aging and Disability Services, bringing back a coordinated, "one-stop shop" for assistance that was decentralized when the state terminated its original Commission for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing in 2016 as Connecticut faced a [\\$170 million deficit](#).

Ritter said he hopes to have the Bureau of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Services operational and staffed with an executive director and up to two support personnel within the next 12 months.

“(This proposal) is about policy that is correct and rectifying a wrong that the legislature did,” Ritter said. “Our budget circumstances were far different and more dire years ago, but now we have a chance to change.”

“These individuals can reclaim the services that they had and live their lives with the same dignity as all of us in the state deserve and want to do for our families,” Ritter added.

## **Erosion of services**

In the roughly eight years since the collapse of the Connecticut Commission for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, Luisa Gasco-Soboleski has watched state services for her community erode.

When Gasco-Soboleski, the current president of the [Connecticut Association of the Deaf](#), moved to Connecticut in 1979 to assume a teaching position at the [American School for the Deaf](#) in West Hartford, she said she was “blown away with the wealth of resources” provided by the state.

In the 1980s, during the deliveries of Gasco-Soboleski’s two children at Hartford Hospital, Gasco-Soboleski said she was provided an interpreter to allow Gasco-Soboleski to communicate with staff and understand what the doctors and nurses were doing.

Decades later in 2023, Gasco-Soboleski said a friend was forced to endure the delivery of her baby without the same accommodations.

“She was terrified and extremely nervous to have no idea as to what was going on with her own body,” Gasco-Soboleski said Tuesday in sign language translated by an interpreter.

Gasco-Soboleski said another patient, who is deaf and blind, had her doctor’s appointments canceled and rescheduled 30 times because they could not find an interpreter.

“Since COVID-19, I’ve really seen a lot more of these issues come up,” Gasco-Soboleski said. “Unfortunately, it’s not only happening in a hospital setting, it’s happening in doctor’s offices, it’s happening in the workforce. I’m being called by people every single day for a variety of reasons where they’re facing inaccessible situations.”

“It’s happening in all sectors of people’s lives and it’s been happening for a long time,” she added.

Harvey Corson, chair of the Education and Legislative Committee for the Connecticut Association of the Deaf, said that a [preliminary report](#) from the American School for the Deaf and Innivee Strategies found that “Deaf DeafBlind and hard-of-hearing people in the state of Connecticut were not able to find the services that they needed to access.”

Corson chaired the State Advisory Board Task Force on Needs Assessment of DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Persons, which recommended the creation of the new bureau.

“As a community, we don’t complain much. For a long time we haven’t because we have grown up learning about depending on other people for our understanding, for access,” Corson signed as an interpreter translated. “We (the task force) wanted to approach (the issue) in a more positive forward thinking manner to describe what we can do to improve the situation in cooperation with the state of Connecticut because we do have faith in the state.”

## **Legislative next steps**

Ritter said Tuesday that the legislation will be introduced through the Human Services Committee, chaired by Gilchrest, where it will first undergo a public hearing.

“Some may say, ‘Well that Department (of Aging and Disability Services) already covers this,’ we know the needs of folks are different based on what they’re experiencing,” Gilchrest said. “People can get lost in an agency that large ... And so hearing from folks that it would be important for them to have a Bureau of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard-of-Hearing Services, as the speaker said, it resonated.”

In a statement after the press conference, Sen. Lisa Seminara, a ranking member of the committee, signaled her support for a “worthy conversation” on the proposed bureau.

Seminara said that she [joined advocates at the American School for the Deaf](#) last week to raise awareness of the needs of the state’s Deaf community, particularly in health care and education.

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

“Communication can be the difference between life and death in medical settings, or connection and isolation at school. Incredible work is being done to break down barriers for these communities, and I am honored to be a part of this effort.”

Ritter said that House Democrats have yet to discuss the proposal with Gov. Ned Lamont’s office.

“Given the fiscal note, we’re not too worried that this will be anything that would stop a budget adjustment or go into 2025,” Ritter said.

In a statement to the Courant, Lamont’s Senior Press Secretary David Bednarz said the governor’s office “look(s) forward to reviewing the details.”

“Our office has not yet been provided with information about Speaker Ritter’s proposal, however the administration is certainly supportive of ensuring that adequate services are available for those who are deaf and hard of hearing,” Bednarz said.