



Mr. Chairman and Members of the House Committee on Small Business,

Thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony with you.

I wish to impart a personal narrative highlighting a crucial societal aspect. Recently, my daughter, a Child of Deaf Adults (CODA), and I visited a coffee shop. After placing our orders, we settled at a table to await our meal. To my astonishment, she informed me of a traffic incident nearby that blocked the intersection and a significant sale at an electronics store, suggesting an alternate route to explore a needed electronic device for my office. Perplexed, I inquired how she came to know this. She revealed that she had gleaned this information during our brief wait in line. In stark contrast, all I had learned was the cost of my breakfast. This exemplifies 'incidental learning' – an experience often inaccessible to the Deaf community, who primarily rely on visual cues in a world where auditory information prevails.

Despite our advancements in accommodations, such as closed captions, transcripts, and interpreters, much still needs to be accomplished. Closed captions and transcripts, while beneficial, are presented in English. For that reason, ASL is seen as the more accessible language for many. In our pursuit of inclusivity and equal access to information, we must recognize and address these challenges, striving to create a society where every Deaf individual can fully participate and thrive.

I would also like to draw your attention to the financial aspect of providing ASL interpreters, a crucial but often costly resource for the Deaf community. The expense associated with hiring qualified interpreters can

be exorbitant, yet their presence is invaluable for ensuring effective communication. When a skilled interpreter is assigned to a meeting, the investment is undoubtedly worthwhile, enabling full participation and comprehension for Deaf individuals.

However, the high cost becomes particularly wasteful when the quality of interpretation falls short. When interpreters are inadequately qualified, communication effectiveness is compromised, and the financial resources invested yield a poor return. This scenario is not just financially damaging; it also negatively impacts the Deaf community by hindering their ability to engage meaningfully in various settings, be it professional, educational, or social.

This highlights the need for a more sustainable and efficient approach to providing interpreter services. Ensuring access to high-quality interpreters should be a priority, balanced with cost-effectiveness considerations. By addressing these concerns, we can create a more equitable and accessible environment for the Deaf community, where the investment in interpreter services leads to positive outcomes for all parties involved.

Esteemed legislators, it's important to recognize the unique challenges faced by Deaf entrepreneurs in their pursuit of self-sufficiency and economic independence. Despite a strong desire to contribute and participate actively in the economy, Deaf individuals often confront a staggering unemployment and underemployment rate of 55% in the United States. To navigate these challenges, many rely on public benefits like Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) to manage their living expenses while they endeavor to build their businesses.

However, the structure of SSDI presents a significant hurdle. The program's policy of counting nine months of successful income above \$1,300 per month, after which benefits are terminated, can be discouraging. For Deaf entrepreneurs, reaching this income threshold within nine months is particularly challenging due to barriers like inaccessible incidental learning and inconsistent quality of accommodations. This situation creates a

catch-22: while striving for self-reliance and financial independence, the support system intended to assist them can inadvertently hinder their long-term success and stability.

Therefore, it is crucial to consider the unique circumstances of Deaf entrepreneurs in our policy frameworks, ensuring that support systems like SSDI facilitate rather than impede their journey toward economic self-sufficiency. By addressing these issues, we can empower Deaf individuals to achieve their entrepreneurial goals without facing disproportionate setbacks.

We propose several solutions: One being centered on the "Train the Trainer" approach to address these challenges. This method involves providing training and resources directly in American Sign Language (ASL), our native language. Doing so can significantly shorten the learning curve for Deaf individuals, facilitating quicker and more effective skill acquisition. Additionally, this approach offers the dual benefit of increasing employment opportunities within the Deaf community and potentially reducing the costs associated with interpreters.

The establishment of a Nationwide Deaf Small Business Development Center designed to cater specifically to the needs of Deaf entrepreneurs and those aspiring to enter the business realm would become a vital hub for resources and training, tailored to empower the Deaf community in business and entrepreneurship similar to what we'd refer as the Hispanic Small Business Administration.

Train the Trainer workshops and training sessions are at the heart of this initiative, conducted in American Sign Language (ASL). This approach not only ensures direct accessibility of information but also encourages members of the Deaf community to become trainers, creating employment opportunities. Additionally, educational videos and materials in ASL would provide essential business knowledge, available on-demand for flexible learning.

A significant advantage of this initiative is the cost savings on interpreting services. By delivering resources and training directly in ASL, the reliance on interpreters in educational settings is significantly reduced, leading to substantial cost savings.

This center would also enhance employment and self-employment opportunities within the Deaf community. It would equip individuals with the necessary business skills and knowledge to boost economic independence and self-reliance.

Furthermore, the center would offer a wide range of services tailored to Deaf entrepreneurs. From business planning and financial management to marketing strategies, these services would address the unique challenges Deaf individuals face in the business world.

An expanded mentorship program is another key feature. Building on existing programs where experienced Deaf entrepreneurs mentor newcomers, this initiative would increase accessibility, providing valuable one-on-one mentorship to a wider audience.

By creating such a center, we aim to establish a supportive ecosystem for both current and future generations of Deaf entrepreneurs. This initiative represents a significant stride towards achieving economic empowerment and inclusivity for the Deaf community in the entrepreneurial landscape.

Secondly, we propose a solution to extend the 9 month work trial period in which to extend the period. Deaf individuals can receive public benefits like SSDI while re-entering the workforce or establishing their own businesses. Extending this period from the current nine months to 36 months would offer a more realistic timeframe for Deaf entrepreneurs to develop a sustainable income without the immediate risk of losing essential benefits. This extended support period could significantly reduce the number of Deaf individuals needing to return to SSDI.

Such measures would not only aid in the economic empowerment of the Deaf community but also serve as a powerful inspiration. They would demonstrate to our peers, families, and especially younger generations, including Deaf children, that self-sufficiency and success are attainable goals. This can foster a positive cycle of empowerment and achievement within the Deaf community, proving that overcoming barriers to success is not just possible but probable with the right support and resources.

Honorable legislators, we at Gallaudet University are beyond grateful for the opportunity to share our testimony and insights with you. As a leading institution dedicated to educating and empowering the Deaf and hard of hearing, we are committed to advocating for our community and actively collaborating with legislative bodies to foster a more inclusive and supportive society.

We eagerly embrace the prospect of working alongside you to develop and implement solutions that provide essential support and resources for the Deaf community. We aim to create a network of resources and opportunities that facilitate access, education, and employment for Deaf individuals, ensuring they have the tools and support needed to thrive in various aspects of life.

By joining forces, we can build a framework that addresses the current challenges and lays a foundation for long-term success and empowerment. Gallaudet University is dedicated to being an active partner in this endeavor, leveraging our expertise and experience to contribute to meaningful and impactful legislative solutions. Together, we can make significant strides toward a more equitable and accessible world for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

Thank you for your time in reading this testimony. Let's turn our attention to our colleague, Julie Tibbitt, who shares her perspective from the Office for Career Success.

My colleagues, Russell and Lorenzo, provide powerful and authentic perspectives as Deaf experts on small businesses and entrepreneurship in general. In all the time that I have known them, they have served as a powerful beacon for the Deaf community in terms of ongoing business mentoring, support and education. I write this supplementary testimony coming from somebody who currently oversees career services for students and alumni at Gallaudet University; I am also blessed to have grown up in a household where both my parents were full-time business owners and entrepreneurs. I am also currently married to a full-time business owner. I understand and appreciate all the value that small businesses bring to our country. I grew up in a household with strong work ethics and I view this as among the best ways to return gratitude and service back to the country where we are blessed to live in. I also have the experience of being in K-12 school administration, where we oversaw transition planning for deaf and disabled youths up to age 21. Much of my viewpoints are in line with my colleagues, and here are some additional insights that I would like to share with you:

I also wish to add that what we experience are also experienced by members of the diverse community of people with disabilities. This includes developmental disabilities as well as autism, blindness, among others.

Complex federal rules and regulations: Access to benefits requires navigating through multiple complex systems, and the more federal agencies can invest in simplifying the process for all involved, all the better. This impacts even professionals in employment services who do not know or understand all the possible resources available to help their clients.

Transition planning: Deaf individuals often have their futures mapped out without being a central part of the decision-making process. This robs autonomy. *Nothing about us without us.* The transition planning process also needs to start much earlier, in the elementary (formative) years. Quite often, if a vocational

agency is unable to provide direct support (sometimes due to the deaf individual not having a clearly formed plan or not meeting the extensive criteria needed to qualify for such services), the deaf individual is left to fend on their own. Whether they succeed often depends greatly on their own family's level of support which is not always reliable.

Transportation: Rural areas make it more difficult for deaf individuals to gain employment, and added resources would be very helpful in this area. Deaf individuals who do not go to college or trade school, are also unable to network meaningfully with their local community

Postsecondary outcomes: Deaf individuals seeking support from vocational rehabilitation services are often forced to choose certain career options (such as specific colleges or degrees or even vocations) in order to obtain support. This robs autonomy. Small businesses are seldom, if ever, presented as viable options for these individuals. In the hundreds of Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) that I have participated in, none of them provided small businesses as a viable pathway.

Access to Health Care: Deaf individuals along with people with disabilities experience barriers in employment, as their access to health care is also vital. Every single disabled individual I have interacted with has shared traumatic experiences of having their healthcare gone awry due to accessibility issues that were often largely on part of uninformed personnel.

Financial Strain of Interpreter Services: While ASL interpreters are vital, the high costs associated with their services can be a hindrance. Striking a balance between quality and cost-effectiveness is crucial for effective communication. The federal government can make a substantial difference in this through innovative programs that are done elsewhere (such as

the United Kingdom). Consolidating resources on the federal level can produce saved costs in the long run.

Deaf Entrepreneurs' Economic Challenges: Deaf entrepreneurs encounter a high unemployment rate, and existing support systems like Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) may inadvertently hinder their success due to numerous and bureaucratic policy constraints.

Thank you for this opportunity to present this testimony. Please let me know if I can be of service to this committee in your work ahead.

[Submitted by the following representatives from Gallaudet University:

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Respectfully yours,



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