



**Advocacy and Independent Living Services for Individuals
With All Disabilities**

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Introduction

Thank you, Chairpersons Weinstein, Krueger, Mayer and Benedetto for the opportunity to offer this testimony on behalf of the Regional Center for independent Living.

Regional Center for Independent Living (RCIL) is a group created to support independent living and disability resources by providing information and assistance for housing, transportation, home care, securing benefits and other disability services. RCIL advocates for the full integration, independence, and civil rights of people with disabilities. Join us today and become part of our family.

What is LEAD K and why does NY need it?

I am here today as the Deaf Systems Advocate for the Regional Center for Independent Living and as the Chair of the New York LEAD-K Committee. LEAD-K stands for Language Equality and Acquisition for Deaf Kids. LEAD-K is a national campaign to promote language acquisition and kindergarten-readiness for Deaf and hard of hearing toddlers and youth aged 0-5. To date, LEAD-K legislation has passed in seven states: California, Kansas, Hawaii, Oregon, South Dakota, Georgia, and Louisiana. It is needed in all 50 States, including New York. The Deaf Community started LEAD-K because Deaf kids are consistently entering kindergarten behind their non-Deaf peers. It is a gap that only grows once they are in the school system. It is why, on average, Deaf students leave school with a 3rd or 4th grade reading level¹. The research on why this gap exists is spotty at best. We know it is tied to language acquisition, but beyond that there is an extreme lack of data. LEAD-K is designed to remedy this. The legislation would require the State to assess the language acquisition in Deaf students aged 0-5 and feed the data from that assessment to a committee comprised of a wide range of experts. The committee would then take the data and use it to steer the State Education Department's early intervention and support strategies. Without this data and the committee to interpret it, Deaf students will continue to be at the mercy of an education system with little understanding of their language acquisition and that system will continue to fail them.

The need for this legislation cannot be understated. A majority of Deaf students do not pass their Regents exams and therefore cannot take up the same opportunities

¹ Visual Language & Visual Learning Research Brief: Reading Research & Deaf children; Donna A. Morere, PH.D., June 2011

the State offers their non-Deaf peers. Programs the State is rightly proud of such as the Excelsior scholarship are not accessible to large segments of the Deaf community. This then perpetuates the poverty and underemployment experienced by many Deaf New Yorkers. Only 38.3% of adults in New York's Deaf Community are in full time employment².

Deaf kids must not be an afterthought in the New York's kindergarten readiness agenda

New York must begin to address Deaf kindergarten readiness, whether it is through the budget process or other legislation. LEAD-K New York has model legislation that we are happy to make available to this body and anyone else who is interested. It has no opposition and would set New York down the path to remedying this issue. My reason for bringing this into this hearing is that the state spends \$800 million on prekindergarten programs annually, and this year's budget proposes an \$15 million dollar expansion. None of this is dedicated to addressing the language acquisition of deaf kids.

The Deaf Community has been largely denied access to language and an appropriate education for most of the last 150 years. Without LEAD-K this inequity is likely to continue. To date, New York has shown little awareness that there is even a problem. You can end that. New York must stop treating Deaf children as afterthoughts. LEAD-K New York, calls on you all as legislators to address Deaf kindergarten readiness now. New York's Deaf Community has already waited too long.



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Chair LEAD K New York

² Disability Statistics. Search results under the category: Disability Type = Hearing Disability. <http://www.disabilitystatistics.org/reports/acs.cfm?statistic=4> . Last accessed January 31, 2019.