



Hundreds of Deaf Floridians and Advocates Rally at Capitol for Legislation Enhancing Deaf Floridians' Rights

Seeking Legislation to License Sign Language Interpreters, Restoration of Funding for Deaf Coordinating Council and Clemency for Wrongly Convicted Deaf Inmate

TALLAHASSEE – Hundreds of Floridians who are deaf or hard of hearing and their family members, interpreters and advocates rallied at the Florida Capitol today for legislation (SB1304 and HB1125) that would require licensure of sign language interpreters and restoration of funding for the council that coordinates the state's policies for deaf Floridians.

The advocates also highlighted the case of Felix Garcia, a deaf man who has served 32 years – so far – for a crime he did not commit, and urged the Governor and Cabinet to free him through the clemency process. Advocates say Garcia's deafness and inability to understand what he was being asked at his trial played a big role in his conviction.

The advocates, representing the Florida Association of the Deaf, Florida Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Florida Deaf Service Center Association and many other groups that assist deaf Floridians, said the failure to accommodate deaf Floridians' communication needs has severe and tragic consequences, including the failure of children to get a proper education, succeed in school and reach their potential; the probability that deaf adults will be unemployed or underemployed and unable to support themselves; medical misdiagnosis and the greater likelihood of wrongful conviction.

"Interpreters play a vital role in the lives of the deaf and hard of hearing." Said Florida Senator Thad Altman. "It is critical that we ensure that interpreters are competent. I believe this is possible through an efficient and unobtrusive licensure process."

Having certified sign language interpreters in schools, medical offices and legal proceedings, among other settings, will help avoid these grave consequences and ensure that deaf Floridians enjoy the same rights as other residents. The Florida Registry of Interpreters says that Florida has the third largest number of certified sign language interpreters already, so the state would not have a problem meeting the need if the legislation passes.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 3.1 million Floridians are deaf, hard of hearing or deaf/blind. An estimated 10 percent of those use sign language as their primary language.

"Too often, deaf Floridians either have no communication access or are provided with an unqualified interpreter unable to establish effective communication," said Vicky Fales, president of the Florida Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. "The unethical incident at Nelson Mandela's funeral was a very high-profile example of a problem that disenfranchises millions of deaf people every day."

Felix Garcia didn't have the benefit of an interpreter when he was convicted in 1983. Instead, speakers were turned up to full volume, which he experienced as noise. Garcia answered yes to questions he couldn't hear or understand because, he said, he thought that would allow him to get the proceeding over faster and go home.

Garcia was framed for the murder by his brother and sister, who have since recanted and provided affidavits attesting to his innocence. Despite having two witnesses who testified that he was with them across town at the time of the murder and couldn't possibly have committed the crime, Garcia was convicted and has served 32 years behind bars.

Advocates are urging the Governor and Cabinet to extend executive clemency to Garcia, who has been a model prisoner, has completed occupational and life skills training and has devoted himself to service and faith-based pursuits. Felix is an innocent man who needs our help.

Felix is being represented pro bono by Reggie Garcia (no relation,) an experienced clemency lawyer who has represented clients for 20 years before four governors.

"The case of Felix Garcia is a tragic failure of our justice system, triggered in no small part by his disability and the system's failure to respond. Justice is supposed to be blind, but it should not be deaf," Reggie Garcia said. "We urge the Governor and Cabinet to release Felix from prison and reverse the terrible injustice Felix has endured for more than three decades."

Advocates said the Legislature has made progress on deaf issues in recent years, last year passing the Deaf Children's Bill of Rights, which requires communication accommodations within deaf children's individual education plans. But they said progress is hampered by the elimination of funding for the Florida Coordinating Council for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, which is the state's central resource and policy coordinator for deaf Floridians. The Council, which was sustained for many years with an annual appropriation of \$250,000, was defunded three years ago.

"Just because a person can't hear doesn't mean they shouldn't be heard. They must be heard," said Lissette Molina Wood, president of the Florida Association of the Deaf. "We are here petitioning our government to ensure deaf Floridians have the same rights and opportunities to get an education, be employed and enjoy freedom as other Floridians."

A Facebook page for Felix and a petition to the Governor and Cabinet to grant him executive clemency have been created, so that we may better offer our support in freeing an innocent man. The links have been provided below:

View the Petition "Grant Executive Clemency to Felix Garcia": http://bit.ly/FreeFelix

Visit the Facebook page here: https://www.facebook.com/championsforjusticeforfelixgarcia