

Good afternoon, Chair Fischer and Committee Members,

My name is Maren Christenson Hofer and I am the Executive Director for a non-profit organization called the Multicultural Autism Action Network or MAAN, which is the Somali word for “mind.”

Our organization serves autistic children and their families primarily in the Somali and Oromo communities, and I am here to speak to you in support of HF 1043, which seeks to address the fact that services **FOR** people with disabilities, are in fact often inaccessible **TO** People with disabilities.

As you may be well aware, the system that we currently have in place to provide waivers, grants, and PCA services makes it incredibly difficult for families needing support to **access** that support. There needs to be a balance between ensuring good use of resources and providing support for individuals and their families. Right now that scale is weighted heavily in favor of resource protection and away from providing support.

Our organization helps families navigate the often complicated path to services for children with disabilities. We have worked with families that have been denied waivers because they didn't know what a “Wechsler” was (it is an IQ test). We have seen families denied waivers because they didn't have access to a fax machine and couldn't meet paperwork deadlines. We have seen families denied waivers because they did not use the words “elopement” or “respite” to describe their child's needs.

In one case, a family called us in a panic because they had taken their child to see a doctor and the doctor's office turned them away because their Medical Assistance wasn't up to date. The family was in a panic, knowing that their child needed medical attention. Our organization had helped this family access disability-based medical assistance just a few months before, so we know that it could not be a problem of submitting renewal paperwork incorrectly. **It took us 22 phone calls** to the various agencies at the county and state, to figure out that what had happened was a problem with the MACS and MEXES computer systems not talking to each other.

The family had done nothing wrong. It was a system problem. And this may be an extreme example, but it is not an isolated one. How many families have the bandwidth or the tenacity to troubleshoot problems like this? How are working families supposed to troubleshoot when they need to take time off from work to make phone calls during business hours? What would have happened if this family did not have access to a language interpreter through our organization? How many families who qualify for services simply give up when the barriers to access are too high?

We know that the current system prioritizes families who speak English as their first language. It prioritizes individuals who can navigate paperwork. It prioritizes people who have excellent executive function skills. And it prioritizes people who have the social capital necessary to

navigate “the system.” If you don’t know how to access something, do you know someone who does? Is there someone in your social circle who can answer questions or troubleshoot? Or someone who can make a call on your behalf? All of those are services our organization provides, but the truth of the matter is we only reach a very small percentage of individuals that need the help, and **any system that relies on social capital for access is, by definition, discriminatory.**

It is time for us to take a good hard look at how to improve the accessibility of our services for people with disabilities, and this bill does exactly that. Services **FOR** people with disabilities must be accessible **TO** people with disabilities, and that is why I ask for your support of HF1043.

Thank you.