

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Benson, advocates: communication impediment designation aids in safety, comfort**

Today, Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson continued her tour of Department of State office locations across the state with stops in Howell and Mason. At the latter, she was joined by representatives from a number of autism and deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing advocacy groups to highlight recent changes to Michigan law that allow residents to add a communication impediment designation to their driving record that would help ensure better, safer interactions with law enforcement.

“Alerting law enforcement to the needs of the citizens they interact with helps ensure the safety and comfort of everyone involved,” said Benson. “I’m grateful to be at the helm of the Department during the implementation of this designation, as it not only facilitates effective communication between officers and citizens but also helps diminish anxiety surrounding these interactions, opening new doors of opportunity for all Michiganders.”

“I advocated and provided testimony for this bill because of my experience as someone with autism being pulled over by an officer, and having an anxiety attack because of it, and the officer did not know how to respond,” said Xavier DeGroat of the Xavier DeGroat Autism Foundation, who helped advocate for the legislation. “That’s why I advocated for it and I’m happy to see these bills are taking effect.”

The communication impediment designation program was developed to assist law enforcement in their interactions with the public. Being alerted to the needs of individuals with a communication impairment will assist law enforcement in their interactions with these individuals, promoting clarity and understanding. Environmental factors, such as flashing lights and sirens, can also be controlled to help individuals who are sensitive to that type of external stimulation.

“Awareness is the first step to understanding, and for a person with autism, understanding opens doors,” said Colleen Allen, Ph.D., President and CEO of the Autism Alliance of Michigan. “This designation will not only keep people safe, it will help give Michiganders with autism a new opportunity – the ability to navigate their communities knowing that, whether in an emergency or routine traffic stop, law enforcement can be made aware of their needs and tailor their interaction to them. This change is a victory for the autism community.”

“Fully 7.4 percent of Michigan residents identify as deaf, deafblind or hard of hearing. We are a diverse community with equally diverse communication preferences and tools we rely on to communicate in our daily lives,” said Annie Urasky, Director of the Michigan Division on Deaf, Deafblind and Hard of Hearing. “This voluntary designation for driver licenses and state ID cards gives our community an important additional tool for easing communication with police. The Division on Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing stands ready to partner with the Secretary of State and law enforcement agencies to encourage individuals who are deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing to embrace this designation and the opportunity it provides to impact awareness about communications barriers. We all have the same goal: to ensure effective

communication in situations where safety is a priority.”

The communication impediment designation program is voluntary and there is no cost to apply. The designation is not printed on the actual license, ID or vehicle registration, but added to the individual's record. To add the designation, individuals may [submit a communication impediment designation form](#) to the department by mail, email or fax. Forms may also be submitted during a branch office visit.

“People who are DeafBlind can communicate using different ways with DeafBlind interpreters, protactile interpreters, large print materials and assistive technology and our organization supports the importance of making sure that law enforcement understands these communication needs in order to improve communication access for the DeafBlind,” said Autumn Stephens, Board Member for Self Help for Independence in Michigan Equalizing the DeafBlind.

“Michigan Coalition for the Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing supports the communication impediment designation, which creates a transparency between the law enforcements and the designated driver to notify their nature of a disability which helps to alleviate the barriers in communication to avoid confusion,” said Kelley Wyse, President of the Michigan Coalition for the Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing. “It’s an ultimate guide and strategies to improve team communication. We feel it’s an essential way to build that bridge between us.”

A licensed physician, physician assistant, certified nurse practitioner or physical therapist must certify that the individual requires special considerations when communicating. Legislation to add audiologists, speech-language pathologists and psychologists to the list of healthcare professionals allowed to certify about an individual’s special communication needs is currently pending.

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