

Transcript Prepared by Clerk of the Legislature Transcribers Office
Health and Human Services Committee March 19, 2025

HARDIN: Welcome to your Health and Human Services Committee. I would just like to say, for the record, that I really appreciate Senators Riepe, Fredrickson, Quick, and Ballard, that's Ballard, who is here today. Is, is Glen here as well?

BARB DORN: He was.

FREDRICKSON: He was this morning.

HARDIN: OK.

RIEPE: I don't see him in the chair.

HARDIN: So we have some testimonies that we will be reading today, given the inclement weather. And so we want everyone to be safe. And it continues, that weather. So with that, I'm going to start with-- Mr. Gonshorowski's is last, so we start with Ms. Crabtree. Reading for Ms. Kay Crabtree, deposition for Nebraska Commission of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing representative. She writes: Hello, my name is Kay Crabtree, and I'm honored to have the opportunity to share with you regarding my interest in serving on the Board of the Nebraska Commission of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. As someone who is deeply compassionate about advocacy, inclusivity, and ensuring that the voices of the deaf and hard of hearing communities are heard, I believe my background, experience, and personal commitment make me well-suited to represent these communities and support positive changes in our state. Over the years, I have developed a deep understanding of the unique challenges that members of this community face, including barriers to education, employment, health care, and daily communication. I was working as a registered nurse in an acute care setting when I began to lose my hearing at age 28. With no deaf or hard of hearing friends or family members, I had little support. As a single mom of a young child, the uncertainty of what my future held was very unsettling. A work colleague recommended Nebraska VR, that's Vocational Rehabilitation. The advocacy that they provided for me included household needs and tuition assistance to help me in picking up some college classes as I determined my next steps. University of Nebraska at Kearney and Lincoln both were supportive in providing assistive technology needs as I pursued and completed my PhD in Biomedical Sciences. During this time, as I lost my hearing completely, I underwent two surgeries to have bilateral cochlear implants placed. I currently serve as a professor at Bryan College of Health Sciences. Nebraska VR has made this possible for me by providing financial support to upgrade my implant processors and

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assistive technology needed at work. One key area I would focus on as a representative is improving access to education and workforce opportunities for the deaf and hard of hearing. Ensuring that students have the resources they need to succeed, whether through accessible materials, specialized support staff, or effective communication tools, is crucial for their academic success. I also strongly believe in creating more job opportunities by encouraging inclusive hiring practices, providing training for employers, and supporting job placement programs tailored to the needs of the deaf and hard of hearing community. Furthermore, I'm a firm advocate for the importance of accessible health care. Too often, individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing face difficulties in accessing quality medical care, whether due to a lack of trained interpreters, communication barriers, or unaccommodating health care practices. I will work tirelessly to ensure that accessible health care services are available, readily available to those who need them, ensuring their rights to privacy, dignity, and proper care are upheld. To conclude, I'm ready to bring my passion, skills, and dedication to this role. I'm excited about the opportunity to collaborate with other Commission members, community leaders, and the people of Nebraska to ensure that the deaf and hard of hearing communities are not only represented, but empowered. I believe that by working together, we can create a more inclusive and accessible future for all Nebraskans. Thank you for your time and consideration. And, again, that was by Dr. Kay Crabtree. Secondly, we're going to-- what's that?

BARB DORN: There's one online comment.

HARDIN: One online comment?

BARB DORN: For her.

HARDIN: And that was a proponent?

BARB DORN: I think it's neutral.

HARDIN: It's neutral? Thank you. OK, zero proponents, zero opponents, one in the neutral for Kay Crabtree. And that ends our hearing on this snowy day for the gubernatorial appointment confirmation for Kay Crabtree, Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Moving onto John Culver, Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing gubernatorial appointment. He writes: Dear senators, my name is John Culver and I live between Milford and Lincoln, Nebraska, on a small acreage. I just finished being a county commissioner for 2 terms. During my time I was chairman for 5 years of that and served on many committees and boards.

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I served on the Blue Valley Community Action Executive Board for 8 years, and served as president for the last year. I served on the Seward County 911 Board, serving as chairman for 3 years of my 8 years. I served on the Seward/Saline Solid Waste Management Board overseeing the landfill for 8 years, and served as chairman for 5 of those years. I oversaw as liaison for several county elected officials and department heads, offering guidance and go-between for them and the full board of commissioners. I served on the Seward/York County Local Emergency Planning Board for 8 years. So I have a lot of experience on boards and committees. I would like to continue to serve and help where I can. My loss-of-hearing journey has been long and expensive. I have for the last 50 years been battling hearing loss and struggles with communicating and hearing conversations. I've gone through many hearing aids as the advanced-- as they advanced in technology, as my hearing continued to get worse. I tell people, it's not that I cannot hear you, but with my situation, it is understanding the words with decibel levels in my hearing going away. I also struggle in a lot of situations where there is a kind of echo or more than one person talking. The environment I am in at the time plays a huge role in my understanding of conversations or understanding what I'm hearing at meetings or presentations. The devices that I've used pick up everything, and the brain has to adjust to picking out where to prioritize. I now have gotten to the point where I have dual cochlear implants. I had the first one over 5 years ago while still using a hearing aid in my left ear. A year ago, I had the left one done at my cost as the insurance company and plan that the county has does not cover hearing loss, even though it requires surgery for a person to hear. A lot of the devices I had to purchase to try and, and get to a point I could function and participate in things came out of my pocket as a lot of it is deemed experimental. I have had over the year-- over-the-ear devices and in-ear devices, and even one that was called Esteem, that was the same size as a pacemaker that was implanted under the skin above my ear and wired to the inner bones of the ear to activate them to aid in hearing. I paid out well over \$100,000 of my own money over the years trying to hear and be able to participate in conversations. I would hope my experiences could aid someone with their journey in the hearing loss and struggles coping with it. I was lucky enough also years back when I started at the University of Nebraska to get a job by City Campus, working for a firm that had 2 deaf men working there, there. And they were great at trying to teach me how to sign even before I would really need it myself, but aided in communicating with them. Just like learning a foreign language to travel overseas, it is a fun journey. Since that time it has come in handy many times just to say hi to deaf people and

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carry on a conversation with them. I know how it is to be on the outside of a conversation and not know what people are saying to me or understand what they're saying. I have a long way to go in order to be proficient in it, but I love to learn new things. I think I would be a great asset on this board to help in any way I can with either my experience or background. I ask for your approval for me to be on this board and serve the public and hearing-disabled people all across Nebraska. Thank you. John K. Culver. And Mr. Culver-- let's see--

BARB DORN: There's nothing.

HARDIN: There was no online comment on that one. And this concludes the testimony for Mr. Culver. Next up is Valerie Hitz, Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. She writes: Hello, my name is Vali Hitz, and I have the honor of serving as the elected vice chairperson for NCDHH. I am deeply committed to providing support for deaf, deaf, blind, and hard of hearing community for equal-- equality access and empowerment. NCDHH has taught me meaningful and impactful things in the community we serve. I'm looking forward to drive meaningful change and support for our shared vision. Thank you for your time in reading this. And were there-- was there any testimony for Ms. Hitz?

BARB DORN: Nothing.

HARDIN: Seeing none, that concludes the reading for Ms. Hitz. We are up to Mr. Richard McCowin on the Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Writes: Dear Committee Members: Thank you, Governor Jim Pillen, for appointing me to serve the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing as a Commissioner. Thank you, HHS Committee, for inviting me here at the hearing for the confirmation of Governor Pillen's appointment today. Let me introduce myself very briefly to you. My name is Richard D. McCowin. I was born in north Omaha, Nebraska. I graduated from the now closed Nebraska School for the Deaf in Omaha and from the Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. and University of Nebraska at Omaha. While I enjoy watching the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing serving the deaf and hard of hearing citizens for 46 years, I have served many different nonprofit organizations and public governments inside and outside Nebraska. Inside Nebraska, served NCDHH, formerly Nebraska Commission for the Hearing Impaired, as the Commissioner during the years of 1990 through '97. Served as the member of the Omaha Mayor's Commission for citizens with disabilities under Omaha Mayor Hal Daub January 1995 to January of 2001, and involved with Nebraska Association of the Deaf for 44 years, including serving a 6-year term as president. And then outside Nebraska, served the Board of Directors for the National

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Association of the Deaf, NAD, in Silver Spring, Maryland, for 10 years, including being the national vice president for 2 years. Also, activated as the member of the national task force for the deaf and hard of hearing postal workers with United States Postal Service and American Postal Workers Union in Washington, D.C. The reason I want to serve NCDHH again is because serving deaf and hard of hearing people in the nation is my lifetime commitment. Right now, the greatest concern is that I learn that Nebraska is 1 of the 17 states suing against physical, visual, hearing, or other disabilities as defined in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. I understand that every day NCDHH operates various services not just for the deaf and hard of hearing people, but also for all those involved working with deaf communities in the state of Nebraska. NCDHH depends heavily on the section of 504. My focus will be on my duty as a commissioner to make sure that NCDHH maintains the betterment of deaf and hard of hearing citizens of Nebraska. Thank you for your consideration. Richard D. McCowin. Online, did we have proponents, opponents? We did not. And so that ends the read testimony of Mr. McCowin. The next gubernatorial appointment, Julie Ann Mruz, Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Hello, my name is Julie Mruz, and I am a 36-year-old resident of Lincoln, Nebraska. I believe I'm qualified and I am very excited to serve on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Board. I have always been interested in state and local government, and the idea of getting to have a small but effective impact on our community means more than this letter can express. Shortly after I was born, I struggled with various ear infections for much of my infancy. I believe I had tubes put in my ears approximately 3 times, all of which were unsuccessful. When I was in second grade, I recall a day in which we were taking a spelling test. Suddenly, my eardrum in my left ear ruptured and the little boy seated to my left turned and asked me what that noise was. I ended up having a major ear surgery. Doctors learned I had a condition called-- and forgive me if I get this wrong-- Cholesteatoma, and it had damaged 2 of the 3 bones in my inner ear and caused the pressure to rupture my eardrum. The surgery attempted to rid of the Cholesteatoma and insert 2 prosthetics to take the place of the 2 damaged bones in my inner ear. This caused a great deal of hearing loss. I then had another surgery in third grade to attempt to clean out the Cholesteatoma that continued to grow back. Doctors thought this would improve my hearing, but it did not. Potentially, it caused more hearing loss due to the scar tissue that formed. Again, in postgraduate school I had to have the same surgery, unfortunately, hearing loss remained and potentially worsened. It wasn't until 2021 when I was convinced by my ENT doctor to get my bone-anchored hearing aid. In October of that year, I underwent a procedure to have a

titanium implant, an external abutment inserted into my skull above my left ear. After 3 months of healing, I was finally able to be fitted for my sound processor, a small attachment. The sound processor acts like a small speaker that gathers sound and then converts it into vibrations. The vibrations are then transmitted through bone conduction, bypassing the middle ear and bringing the sound directly to the inner ear. My hearing organ still works, but all the scar tissue, etcetera, in the middle ear blocks a lot of that sound. By using my BAHA, it helps tremendously, especially in situations in which there is a lot of background noise. It's extremely difficult for me to pick up on these conversations in these environments. I am so glad I was able to receive even the slightest improvement in my hearing, and I wish I would have put self-conscious feelings aside and gotten it sooner. My hearing with my BAHA is not perfect, but it's a whole new world being able to hear better. I believe I can bring a unique perspective to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Board. As a child, I had to make sure to put myself in situations to be able to try and hear what was going on. For example, in school, I always had to ask teachers if I could sit on the left side of the room so my good ear was towards the teacher. I have also had to have conversations that can sometimes be hard to have with friends and coworkers and others about how I'm not able to hear out of my left ear well. My BAHA helps, but it can only do so much when there is a lot of background noise. Thankfully, those in my life that have learned about my hearing loss have always tried to be accommodating. As one can imagine, having those conversations as a preteen and teenager have not always been as openly received. Navigating those awkward middle school and teenage years was sometimes difficult, as it was an added difference on top of the normal attempts that children that age make to fit in with their peers. In college, I knew certain environments were going to be hard to follow conversations. I taught myself how to use lip reading to try to keep up with my peers. I am nowhere near perfect in this department, but it is still a tool I use daily in the workplace. Overall, I know I'm very lucky and blessed to have the assistance of my BAHA. It's a godsend when I can remember to always have backup batteries with me. I look forward to learning from others on this board and to, hopefully, be able to help even just 1 person that has similar experience to mine. Thank you for your time. Sincerely, Julie Mruz. And I hope that I'm pronouncing her last name correctly. It's M-r-u-z. And so online submitted testimony? None on that one. So this completes the read testimony of Ms. Julie Mruz. Lastly, on this snowy day, we're going to read the testimony of Mr. Drew Gonshorowski. And it reads as follows: Drew Gonshorowski, Director of Division of Medicaid and Long-Term Care for Health and Human Services. Good

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afternoon, members of the Health and Human Services Committee, my name is Drew Gonshorowski. I am the Director of the Division of Medicaid and Long-Term Care within the Department of Health and Human Services. Governor Pillen has appointed me to the Health Information Technology Board, the HIT Board that is, in an official capacity as the health care payer board member representing Nebraska Medicaid. As you may recall from my recent confirmation hearing, I hold a Bachelor of Science in Economics from Hillsdale College and a Master of Science in Economics from Suffolk University. Prior to my current role as Nebraska's Medicaid Director, I held roles at policy organizations where I studied the economic and policy impacts of Medicaid and other health care policies. At The Heritage Foundation, I developed and maintained advanced economic models to evaluate the impact of legislation on government-administered programs. Later, at the Paragon Institute, I coauthored a key report that highlighted flaws in ACA exchange enrollment processes. A priority of mine across these various roles is to improve health outcomes for individuals served by programs like Medicaid, while ensuring these public programs remain fiscally sustainable into the future. To this end, entities like the HIT Board serve a crucial role. As one of the biggest health care payers in the state, I will provide Medicaid's perspective to help inform policy development and planning for the statewide Health Information Exchange, HIE. Conversely, data gathered and managed by the HIE can be a crucial part of the Medicaid policy development as we work to ensure Nebraska's program is sustainable into the future. I look forward to contributing to the work of the board. Thank you for your time. I would be happy to answer any questions. And online, anything related to that one? There is not. So this would conclude the read testimony of Mr. Drew Gonshorowski, Director of Medicaid and LTC for DHHS. And with that, on this snowy day in March, we conclude our read testimonies and our hearings for today for HHS.