

(S. B. 185)

**(No. 78-2018)**

(Approved February 23, 2018)

## **AN ACT**

To amend subsection (k) of Section 1.11 of Act No. 20-2017, as amended, known as the “Puerto Rico Department of Public Safety Act,” in order to require that the members of the Puerto Rico Police Bureau attend a compulsory Sign Language seminar every year as part of their continuing education so they are appropriately trained to help persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech impairment; and for other related purposes.

### **STATEMENT OF MOTIVES**

Sign language is a non-verbal human language that emerged naturally in the deaf community through the interactions of its members as a response to their innate need to communicate. Like any language, sign language provides direct access to all linguistic and cognitive functions, there are dialects and individual variables, and it shares linguistic universals with other spoken languages. However, it has its own vocabulary, morphology, syntax and semantic and pragmatic rules, and it is composed of basic elements called parameters.

Sign languages differ from spoken languages in terms of structure because they are not produced or perceived in the same way, however, they do not differ in terms of function. It is said that sign language is the natural language of deaf people because it emerges naturally through their constant interactions. As response to their hearing impairments, they use the visual-gestural modality to communicate.

Deaf people are born with the full biological capacity for language. Nevertheless, their sensory limitation prevents them from acquiring the vocal language spoken around them. They have the capacity for language development, but the information needed to activate such development cannot be accessed by the brain through traditional means because the auditory channel is blocked. The child is able to receive information through the other senses and he begins to construct his own hypotheses about the world around him. This process, however, is incomplete and does not allow the child to develop thinking skills or other abilities related to the processing, storage, and communication of complex information about the world. In order to achieve the foregoing, the child requires full immersion in a language.

Sign language is essential in the lives of deaf people because languages are a symbol of ethnic identity and it serves as a symbol that these people who are hard of hearing belong to the deaf community or deaf population. Language is a fundamental element for the cognitive and social development of a human being, therefore, sign language, the natural language of deaf people, helps them acquire and understand knowledge, social customs, and culture, among other things. Likewise, it allows deaf people to develop individuality, become independent, and form their own identity. The deaf person is able to reconstruct the meaning of things and the medium with more certainty which, in turn, allows him to achieve greater levels of socialization and interaction.

Being the natural language of deaf individuals, it is the best medium of instruction and knowledge acquisition (UNESCO, 1995) because it enables them to access higher levels of education. Sign language facilitates the acquisition and comprehension of a second language because it is through the native language that people are able to acquire a second language. This shall ensure that deaf people are no longer subjected to rote learning.

In addition, it enables the participation of deaf people in various social fields thus ensuring that, gradually, more deaf people shall be able to take control of their lives in the future, which shall contribute to their transformation.

It is important that hearing persons learn sign language as it allows for a greater and better understanding of deaf people as human beings, thereby eliminating any clinical or rehabilitation perceptions they may have and changing attitudes. This allows for greater social interaction and communication between deaf children and hearing family members thus bridging the communications gap between hearing and deaf people.

At present, there are approximately 136,000 individuals in Puerto Rico who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech impairment. However, this population often does not receive proper services due to the very limited number of hearing persons who know sign language.

This Legislative Assembly became aware of the tragic motor vehicle accident involving several deaf individuals. Both the members of the Puerto Rico Police Bureau and the personnel of the hospital institution that received the victims were unable to render proper services to such victims. Although the victims' deaths cannot be blamed on the fact that the first responders did not know sign language, nor does this Act intend to place such blame, the need to provide sign language training to more people is evident.

Consistent with the aforementioned and for the purpose of enacting preventive legislation, the Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico deems it necessary for the members of the Puerto Rico Police Bureau to know basic sign language to ensure that this population is rendered quality services.

It is imperative to reiterate that the Puerto Rico Police Bureau is comprised of men and women who have a great interest in working for Puerto Rico. This entity makes numerous efforts to structure its obligations and the services it

renders so that citizens feel safer; furthermore, it organizes its internal operations to render a service of excellence.

Police work groups in administrative and operational systems with state and federal agencies are focused on and committed to fighting crime and protecting life and property in order to improve the quality of life in Puerto Rico. Furthermore, they have a duty to enforce law and order while always showing a human side as they remain inflexible in the face of delinquency and criminal behavior, thus making our Island safer.

In light of the foregoing, we deem it appropriate for the members of the police force to be duly trained to address not only the needs of citizens in general, but also the needs of persons with disabilities.

***BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF PUERTO RICO:***

Section 1.- Subsection (k) of Section 1.11 of Act No. 20-2017, as amended, is hereby amended to read as follows:

“Section 1.11.- Public Safety Training and Development Center; General Provisions

The Public Safety Training and Development Center is hereby created, which shall be under the supervision of the Secretary and have the following functions:

(a) ...

...

(k) To establish specialized training for the different areas of the seven (7) Bureaus with the assistance of external and internal sources. It is hereby established that the members of the Puerto Rico Police Bureau shall attend a compulsory Sign Language seminar every year as part of their continuing education so they are appropriately trained to help people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech impairment;

...”

Section 2.- The Commissioner of the Puerto Rico Police Bureau is hereby empowered to enter into collaboration agreements with other public or private entities, preferably those that are not-for-profit, in order to effectively comply with the provisions of this Act.

Section 3.- This Act shall take effect upon its approval.

## CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify to the Secretary of State that the following **Act No. 78-2018 (S. B. 185)** of the **2<sup>nd</sup> Regular Session** of the **18<sup>th</sup> Legislative Assembly of Puerto Rico**:

**AN ACT** amend subsection (k) of Section 1.11 of Act No. 20-2017, as amended, known as the “Puerto Rico Department of Public Safety Act,” in order to require that the members of the Puerto Rico Police Bureau attend a compulsory Sign Language seminar every year as part of their continuing education so they are appropriately trained to help persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have a speech impairment; and for other related purposes.

has been translated from Spanish to English and that the English version is correct.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, on this 30<sup>th</sup> day of March, 2022.

Mónica Freire-Florit, Esq.  
Director