



February 10, 2026

Re: Support for House Bill HB602– Open Captioning at Motion Picture Theaters

On behalf of the Speech-Language-Hearing Association of Virginia (SHAV), representing speech-language pathologists and audiologists across the Commonwealth, I write in strong support of House Bill 602, relating to open captioning at motion picture theaters.

As professionals who specialize in communication, we work every day with Virginians who are Deaf or hard of hearing, individuals with central auditory processing disorders, people with traumatic brain injury, language disorders, and other conditions that affect their ability to understand spoken language in noisy or complex listening environments. For many of these individuals, open captions in movie theaters are not a convenience; they are an essential accessibility accommodation that permits equal participation in a central part of community life.

HB 602 takes a thoughtful and balanced approach. It:

- Requires theater companies with five or more screens to offer a limited number of open-caption showings during the first two weeks after a film’s release, and to provide additional open-caption screenings upon request thereafter.
- Provides a more flexible standard for companies that own, operate, control, or lease four or fewer locations, requiring at least one open-caption showing within a defined time frame after a request, or allowing them to voluntarily meet the higher standard.
- Requires theaters to clearly post contact information for captioning requests and to advertise open caption showtimes in the same manner as all other showings, ensuring that patrons can actually discover and use these accommodations.
- Establishes a process through the Office of Civil Rights in the Office of the Attorney General for consumers to report suspected violations, which gives the legislation meaningful accountability while minimizing burden on businesses.

From a clinical and educational perspective, the benefits of open captions are clear:

- For Deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, open captions provide direct visual access to dialogue and key sound information, especially in situations where personal amplification (hearing aids, cochlear implants) and assistive listening devices are insufficient or unreliable in a dark, noisy environment.
- For individuals with auditory processing, language, or cognitive-communication disorders, open captions provide a stable visual support that reduces listening effort and fatigue, allowing them to follow complex plots and rapid dialogue more effectively.

- For many children and adults working on language and literacy, including English learners and people using augmentative and alternative communication, open captions offer a rich opportunity to connect spoken and written language in a natural setting in the community.

Importantly, open captioning is an inclusive, low-risk accommodation. It does not require individual patrons to identify themselves or request special equipment at the box office, which can be a barrier and may feel stigmatizing. It also avoids the frequent problems reported with personal caption devices (limited availability, technical malfunction, or poor compatibility with seating and mobility needs). Instead, the entire audience shares the same experience, consistent with the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act's emphasis on integration and full participation.

The bill's tiered structure also recognizes the operational realities of theaters of different sizes. Larger chains have more scheduling flexibility to integrate regular open-caption showings into their programming, while smaller operators can respond to patron requests within a reasonable time frame. This measured approach will significantly expand access without imposing undue hardship on businesses.

As speech-language pathologists and audiologists, we routinely counsel families who avoid movie theaters entirely because they cannot be confident that their loved one will truly be able to understand the film. HB 602 would give these Virginians a clear, predictable path to participation: they could find captioned showings, request them when needed, and trust that such requests will be honored in a timely manner.

For these reasons, the Speech-Language-Hearing Association of Virginia respectfully urges you to report House Bill 602 favorably and to support its passage. This legislation will meaningfully improve access to communication and community life for thousands of Virginians, at modest cost and with clear guidance for theater operators.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to improving accessibility for people with communication and hearing needs across the Commonwealth. We would be pleased to serve as a resource on communication access issues as this bill moves forward.

Sincerely,

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