Stockholm 30 october 2025

Diarienr: 056/2025

To: Mrs. Heba Hagrass, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations

Submission to the call for inputs: Breaking the glass ceiling: equal participation of persons with disabilities in political life

Testimonies collected by: Swedish National Association of the Deaf (SDR),
Hedvig Ledung, President and Therese Rollvén, Project coordinator.
E-mail: therese.rollven@sdr.org

Introduction

The Swedish National Association of the Deaf (SDR) recognizes the importance of documenting and highlighting the lived experiences of deaf individuals who are politically engaged in Sweden. As part of our contribution to the Special Rapporteur's call for input on equal participation in political life, we have collected testimonies from deaf individuals who are currently, or have previously been, elected or appointed to positions in public institutions. These testemonies illustrate both the progress made and the persistent structural barriers that hinder full inclusion and equal participation for deaf people in democratic processes.

Testimony 1: Alexandra Royal – Deaf Politician in Örebro Municipality

My name is Alexandra Royal, and I am an elected representative for the Centre Party in Örebro Municipality. I currently hold three political positions: Member of the Municipal Council, Deputy Member of the Primary School Board (since October 2025) and Vice Chair of the Culture and Leisure Board.

The municipality covers all interpreting costs related to my council and board meetings. The booking of interpreters is handled by the board or municipal secretaries, and I work regularly with three regular interpreters. This continuity is crucial for the success of my political engagement. Political interpretation is demanding due to the pace, language, and complexity of the content, but after seven years in politics, the collaboration with my interpreters works very well.

During my first year, the interpreting agency used a rotating system with multiple interpreters to "give more people a chance." However, this led to increased stress and inefficiency. Each new meeting required me to explain the context from scratch. Although the interpreters tried to share information among themselves, the lack of continuity was exhausting. After a year, I requested to work only with two fixed interpreters (and a third as backup), which has significantly improved the situation. Outside regular meetings, I participate in various community events, site visits, and other assignments. For these, I must book interpreters myself via the municipality's support function. While this usually works, there are times when no interpreters are available. In such cases, I spend considerable time contacting freelancers. On average, I manage to secure interpretation for 90% of my meetings. For the remaining few, I rely on digital solutions such as live captioning, which is not equivalent to full participation. Sometimes, a colleague has typed

on a laptop beside me, but this is not sustainable and limits their own participation.

The municipality covers interpreting costs for official political meetings, but not for other activities such as campaigns, dialogues, or citizen meetings. This presents a significant challenge. During election periods, the interpreting center is responsible for providing interpreters, but I do not always receive the support I need. The national Centre Party allocates 50,000 SEK annually to the Örebro branch to support interpreting costs, which I am very grateful for. These funds allow me to book interpreters for campaign events, debates, and party activities. However, the budget is limited. For example, a three-day top candidate training for the EU elections cost around 20,000 SEK in interpretation.
Initially, there was some uncertainty among colleagues and officials about how a deaf politician would function. Over time, this has changed. When people see that communication works and that I am well-prepared and engaged, my deafness becomes less central. Today, I feel that my colleagues no longer think about my deafness – a sign of true inclusion. However, debates remain challenging due to their fast pace, which even experienced interpreters struggle to keep up with. I must actively signal when I want to speak and constantly balance listening, following interpretation, and participating.
I often wonder why so few deaf individuals engage in politics; in my experience, it takes courage, preparation, and confidence even with interpreter support.

It demands strong will and significant time investment, which may discourage many. Still, I hope more deaf individuals will try. One learns a lot, builds a broad network, and ensures visibility for deaf people in politics – something I believe is vital, as we are part of society too.
In summary, my municipal assignments work very well thanks to regular interpreters and a system that takes responsibility for accessibility. However, major challenges remain regarding political participation outside the municipal framework, especially during election campaigns and party work. I hope the future brings more deaf candidates in Swedish politics, perhaps even in Parliament. That would be a significant step toward genuine representation and equality. Personally, I have decided not to run for Parliament next year, but I will stand for re-election in the municipal elections.

Testimony 2: Isabel Engwall – Deaf Lay Judge and Legal Advocate

Despite Swedish laws that explicitly prohibit discrimination based on disability, deaf individuals often fall through the cracks due to inconsistent interpretations by authorities. The Discrimination Act protects employees, but does not cover deaf individuals in elected or appointed roles, such as lay judges in court.

In 2024, I was appointed as Sweden’s first deaf lay judge at Örebro District Court. Previously, I served at Södertörn District Court in 2020. This role should have been a democratic opportunity to contribute to justice, but more than two years later, I have still not been able to begin my assignment due to a dispute over who is responsible for covering the cost of Swedish Sign Language interpretation.

Örebro District Court claims it is not responsible for the interpreting costs and refers the matter to the regional interpreting center. The interpreting center, in turn, claims it is the court’s or the National Courts Administration’s responsibility.

At Södertörn District Court, I was provided with interpreters, as the court recognized that, under the Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure, a court member has the right to tools necessary to be

understood in the courtroom. In my case, Swedish Sign Language interpretation was deemed such a tool. This demonstrated a clear legal commitment to accessibility and democracy.

However, the Discrimination Act in Sweden is notably ineffective in this context. It protects employees – but not individuals in elected or appointed roles. As a deaf lay judge, I am not covered by the law because I am not formally employed by the court.

Neither the Administrative Procedure Act nor the Health and Medical Services Act grants me the right to appeal a denial of interpreting services. The latter is a duty-based law, not a rights-based one. This means I cannot demand that the interpreting center provide interpretation in court. The question remains: which authority is ultimately responsible for ensuring my right to interpretation in the courtroom?

This is not the first time I have faced such barriers. It is a clear example of a systemic failure affecting deaf individuals across Sweden, where our rights remain incomplete. As long as the laws do not recognize our needs, discrimination continues and deaf people are excluded from democratic participation. This is a recurring structural pattern – and we, the deaf, are the ones paying the price.

My case has now been brought before the EU General Court. The Chair of the Personal Injury Association in Stockholm is currently pursuing the case with two senior lawyers. The case is being examined to determine whether Sweden has complied with EU legal standards and whether the European Commission has acted appropriately. My human rights are not being upheld.

My attorney believes there are strong grounds to escalate the case to the European Court of Human Rights to assess whether Sweden's legal system has violated the European Convention and discriminated against me. Deaf people around the world need a single rights-based law that guarantees access to sign language interpretation, regardless of language, context, role, or level of responsibility. In Sweden, this remains a clear and structural problem: we lack a rights-based law that protects deaf interpreter users.

My case illustrates how narrow, complex, and inaccessible the Swedish legal system can be for deaf interpreter users. I have fought hard to fulfill my role as a lay judge, and it has given me painful insight into how the law fails us. To this day, I still do not know how I will secure interpreting support in the courtroom for the remaining two years of my term.

Testimony 3: Cathèrine Frost – Deaf Regional Politician in Västra Götaland

There is currently no statistics on how many persons with disabilities are politically represented, mainly due to GDPR and the fact that such information is considered sensitive. This makes it difficult to provide a concrete answer, but there are a number of deaf individuals who are politically active, often as part-time politicians, which means they also have a regular job alongside their political engagement.

Formally, there are no legal barriers preventing persons with disabilities from running for office or holding public positions. However, practical obstacles arise, primarily related to the right to sign language interpretation. There is no clear rule about who should cover the cost of interpreters, or even that it should be an automatic right for deaf individuals who are politically active. Often, the organization that appointed the person to a role is responsible for the costs, which creates stigma and a sense of minority stress for deaf people wishing to engage in

politics. Over time, this can lead to reduced capacity for political participation among persons with disabilities.

Other barriers include prejudices among the majority regarding whether a person with a disability has the ability to assert themselves in the same way as others. Reaching leadership positions therefore often requires double the effort: first to engage politically, and then to convince others of one's competence. Economic challenges, such as the cost of interpretation services, also hinder participation, highlighting that the societal support system does not function optimally.

Testimony 4: Göran Alfredsson – Deaf Candidate for European Parliament

Engaging in politics as a deaf person presents significant challenges, particularly regarding sign language interpretation. To participate fully, careful preparation with interpreters is often required, so that they understand the terms used during campaigns and meetings and can convey proposals accurately to decision-makers.

In the spring of 2024, I ran for the European Parliament as a candidate for the Folklistan party. The campaign organization was very helpful, and communication worked well via video relay with an interpreter. On election night, I had two interpreters with whom we reviewed terms and concepts before the meeting, which ensured that discussions ran smoothly and that I could participate on the same terms as others. Without this preparation, misunderstandings and stress can arise, as incorrectly interpreted content may lead others to underestimate one's competence.

Overall, I rarely experience negative attitudes in politics due to my disability. The most important factors are treatment and attitude; a positive approach represents a significant step forward for inclusion.

Comments from the Swedish National Association of the Deaf

The testimonies collected by SDR clearly show that deaf individuals in Sweden continue to face significant structural barriers to full participation in political life, despite formal equality. According to Article 29 of the CRPD, persons with disabilities have the right to participate in political and public life on an equal basis with others. The experiences described in this report demonstrate that this right is not fully realized in practice.

- Access to sign language interpretation is essential for participation, yet the division of responsibility between authorities is unclear, resulting in deaf individuals being excluded from democratic roles.
- Discrimination within the legal system, as illustrated by the case of the deaf lay judge, reveals that current legislation does not protect deaf individuals in non-employed roles, which contradicts the CRPD's requirements for non-discrimination (Article 5) and access to justice (Article 13).

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important report.

Warm regards,



Hedvig Ledung, President
Swedish National Association of the Deaf