



Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
1602 Rolling Hills Drive, Suite 201
Henrico, VA 23229-5012

Advisory Board Meeting Minutes (v. 2)
August 28, 2024

Members Present: Karen Engelhardt, Chairperson Carl Cline, Jr., Vice Chairperson Traci Branch Kristin Karmon Andrew Nash Cathee Wolford	Staff Present: Eric Raff, Director Karen Brimm, Interpreter Services Manager Brittany Howard, TAP Manager Paul Stuessy, Community Services Manager Felecia Smith, Virginia Relay Manager
Members Absent: Chris Gregory	ASL Interpreters/CART Provider: Lois Boyle, CART writer John Folker, Interpreter Ivy Brothers, Interpreter
Visitors: Calvin Hogg, Health and Human Resources	

On Wednesday, August 28, 2024, at 10:00 a.m., the members of the Advisory Board of the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH) convened in the conference room at the VDDHH Central Office, 1602 Rolling Hills Drive, Suite 203, Henrico, Virginia 23229-5012.

CALL TO ORDER

At 10:00 a.m. Karen Engelhardt, Chairperson, called the meeting to order. A quorum was present. Communication rules were reviewed by the Chairperson and Director Raff. Introductions were made for the members and staff present.

Minutes from the May 1, 2024, meeting were reviewed, and a motion was made to approve with no changes (Branch/Wolford). Motion passed by consensus.

PROGRAM REPORTS

Executive – Eric Raff, Director

Advisory Board: Two vacancies need to be filled on the board: a parent representative and a professional services representative for the deaf and hard of hearing. While some individuals have applied through the Commonwealth's process, the Office of the Governor makes the final decision. There has been no response yet, so follow-up with the Secretary of the Commonwealth is planned. Everyone is encouraged to spread the word and suggest potential candidates, who can

then be directed to apply online. In addition, the new Health and Human Resources (HHR) Secretary is Janet Vestal Kelly, who replaced John Littel. John Little is now Chief of Staff to Governor Younkin.

Facility: VDDHH decided not to join DARS on their lease due to a lack of public transportation access at the potential locations. Since the agency serves some consumers who rely on public transportation, VDDHH is now working with the Department of General Services to negotiate a new lease and hopes to stay at the current location.

Human Resources: Karen Rhodes has been hired the Program Administration Specialist and is supervised by Paul Stuessy, Community Services Manager. VDDHH advertised and posted vacant positions, including Policy Analyst, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Regional Specialists for Fredericksburg and Richmond areas, and Deaf Mentor Coordinator. There is a plan to repost for the Policy Analyst role due to a lack of qualified applicants, and the two Regional Specialists might be merged into one. The team is nearly fully staffed despite these vacancies.

Deaf Mentor Project: Mr. Stuessy has taken on responsibilities related to the Deaf Mentor Project, which involves matching families with Deaf mentors, though there's a backlog. The Deaf Mentor Program plays a significant role in helping families learn American Sign Language where there are no other such services available in Virginia. It supports parents on how to include the deaf child within the family unit.

Support Service Provider (SSP) – The training for Deaf-Blind individuals and 2nd cohort of prospective SSPs was completed in July.

HB649-SB265 – Language Assessments of D/HH children: Past legislation (House Bill 649 and Senate Bill) focused on language acquisition for deaf and hard of hearing children aged 0-5. The Department of Education (DOE) released a report, analyzing language development milestones, comparing Deaf children's language acquisition to that of hearing children.

HHR Language and Disability Access Project: A project initiated by HHR Secretariat and led by VCU, focus on improving accessibility for people with disabilities, including language access for non-native English speakers and people with disabilities.

Interpreter Services - Karen Brimm, Manager

Overarching:

Support Service Provider (SSP) Pilot Project: Mr. Stuessy is responsible for coordinating the SSP Pilot Project, which is a collaborative effort led by Director Raff, who oversees it as part of a grant. His role, assigned by the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities, involves tracking progress, managing the budget, and submitting quarterly reports to the Board. These reports outline how funds are used, project activities, and compliance with federal grant requirements. Karen Brimm managed the logistics for the SSP pilot training, organizing a two-day on-site session for trainees who had completed an online course. Ms. Brimm handled travel, hotel arrangements, classroom setup, and coordination with trainers and deaf-blind participants. The event was a success.

Promoting Equity in Healthcare Interpreting (PEHI): The healthcare interpreting project has completed its current mentor cohort. Ms. Brimm will finish the paperwork with the grant provider, but Virginia will not have new mentees in the next grant cycle, resulting in downtime.

HHR Language and Disability Access Assessment Project: The HHR language and disability access assessment project is focusing on improving resources for foreign spoken and sign languages. A checklist will help VDDHH enhance processes by December, with further improvements due next year. Staff will receive laminated sheets with information for using translation services. The assessment revealed no urgent needs, allowing time for enhancements to better serve all consumers.

Interpreter Service Coordination (ISP)

Overall Coordination: Interpreter services are functioning normally, but a shortage of interpreters is increasing the rate of unavailable requests from about 8-10% to an estimated 12%. Addressing this long-term issue will be part of strategic planning discussions focused on supporting interpreter growth and training.

The ISP team's outreach to judges and language coordinators has increased requests for interpreter services, leading to more instances of both availability and unavailability. With only two staff members managing the entire system, they must carefully balance demand and capacity, as all interpreters are freelance. Strategic planning is essential.

Virginia Quality Assurance Screening (VQAS)

VQAS is growing, but developing the new test version has been delayed due to special projects and material revisions. Beta testing has not started yet, but a release is planned soon, followed by continuous updates to keep the test fair. This ongoing process will require time and financial investment to prevent candidates from seeing the materials beforehand.

Virginia Relay – Felecia Smith, Manager

In Q4, Virginia Relay held its second town hall meeting with low attendance but positive feedback. Reaching users is difficult due to privacy laws, resulting in many undeliverable invitations. The next meeting on November 17 will feature Deaf Lead's ASL crisis hotline. Average attendance is 10 to 15 people, and familiarity with the new format is expected to increase. The Outreach Coordinator position at Hamilton is still vacant, putting extra strain on one person managing all Relay partner trainings. Relay traffic continues to decline as users shift from analog to digital services.

Remote Conference Captioning (RCC) requests are declining, which is concerning given the service's potential benefits. Efforts to promote RCC through advertising and outreach to audiologists and organizations like HLAA have been made, but usage fluctuates. Comparatively, Maryland sees slightly higher RCC traffic, likely due to more professionals in the area. Maryland plans to keep RCC services in their contract but separate them from TRS, as TRS doesn't require RCC. Virginia may consider a similar approach to potentially save costs while still coordinating RCC requests. This will be discussed with Director Raff in the coming months.

Analog to Digital Transition: The focus is on transitioning TTY users from analog to digital communication. An iPad has been provided to a user, along with training on Real-Time Text (RTT). Collaborations with Hamilton and nWise are ongoing to conduct a feasibility study for the Universal Telecommunications Access Platform (UTAP) to identify and address system issues. Virginia Relay and TAP will be meeting with external partners next quarter that will be under the umbrella of UTAP and analog to digital transition.

Relay and TAP Marketing: The feasibility study aims to gather TTY users to demonstrate how to use RTT services through Virginia Relay. This complex technology will enable TTY users to connect and place calls similarly to traditional TTY but using RTT. Questions about the technology and its acronyms are welcomed.

Meetings/conferences/presentations: Ms. Smith will attend the TEDPA/NASRA Conference in September.

Technology Assistance Program, Brittany Howard, Manager

Regional update: Regions 5 and 7 are currently vacant and TAP visit services are being covered temporarily until placements are filled. Although candidates were interviewed for Region 7, none were recommended by the interview panel to move forward.

Centralizing TAP Application Process: The TAP application process has been centralized as of July 1st, with all applications now reviewed at the central office before specialists are dispatched to assist consumers. This change is intended to maintain data integrity and timely reporting. Specialists still provide on-site assistance for consumers who may need help with their applications, particularly those with limited support or physical challenges, and can assess eligibility directly.

Online TAP application status: We are pleased to make it easier for people to go on the VDDHH website to fill out their TAP application, process it, and connect them the local regional specialist nearby. Centralizing the TAP application process now allows specialists to track activities in the TAP database, enabling real-time reporting. Specialists no longer need to produce separate reports, as data entry is handled centrally. They now only submit an end-of-month invoice, simplifying their administrative tasks.

Report changes: Previously, the Deaf/Hard of Hearing Specialists had to submit multiple monthly reports in addition to an invoice, creating duplicated efforts. Now, with the centralization of TAP applications, only the invoice is required as all needed data can be pulled from the TAP database. This change significantly reduces workload and cross-referencing efforts, improving overall efficiency.

Tablet Update: In-person training sessions for specialists on tablets are still planned, but in the meantime, tablets are being released to consumers needing a TTY replacement. With familiarity gained from personal use, support is provided directly to specialists and consumers to ensure proper functionality without waiting for formal training. The tablet's other features will be introduced later once additional training is secured.

Highlighted TAP events: Ms. Howard will attend TEDPA/NASRA Conference in September, and Black Business Expo event.

Community Services – Paul Stuessy, Manager

Information and Referral: The Community Services Program (CSP) remains active, with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Specialists engaging in outreach and training. In three months, they provided nearly 200 referrals, held 39 events, and reached about 800 people through presentations. Common requests included technology, hearing aids, and mental health services.

Outreach, Education and Trainings: CSP participated in Deaf Nation in Chantilly and trained staff at the Virginia Science Museum to improve accessibility for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. In June, the Virginia Early Hearing Detection conference included a presentation by Melissa Forkner, Deaf Mentor Coordinator, on mentoring families. Ms. Rhoads and another team member also conducted a refresher training for police officers at the Rappahannock Criminal Justice Academy, focusing on communication with the deaf community.

Deaf Mentor Program: The program has 13 deaf mentors serving about 55 families, with many on a waiting list. Northern Virginia has 14 families but only three mentors, posing placement challenges, while the Tidewater area has three mentors for nine families. The Deaf Mentor Program was recently advertised on Virginia Jobs to attract more qualified applicants. As the school year starts, families are increasingly seeking services.

Support Service Provider (SSP) Pilot Project: The project focuses on providing essential services to deaf-blind individuals, such as assistance during grocery shopping, doctor's appointments, and arts events. In July, training was held for 20 new SSPs, while 8 deaf-blind participants attended orientation. Currently, there are 36 SSPs in total, including those trained last year. Although 22 registered for the new training, only 20 completed it, with two needing to fulfill an alternative hands-on requirement. Ultimately, 38 trained SSPs are expected, although not all may accept jobs. The program aims to train 50 SSPs, anticipating that about half will be available for work.

BOARD REPORTS (WORKING LUNCH):

Carl Cline, member of the Roanoke Valley Speech and Hearing Board, is planning for the agency's 65th anniversary, focusing on raising awareness and funds. He is seeking involvement from the VDDHH for various projects leading up to the anniversary, with an open house expected early next year.

Dr. Cathee Wolford talked with Steve Gordon from the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, who connected her with organizations to enhance mental health services for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. She is now communicating with the Department of Corrections, DMAS and the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services. She will be presenting at a couple of CSB events during Deaf Awareness Month.

Kristin Karmon shared a positive story about a first grader in Richmond Public Schools who is bilingual in ASL and English. While the school district generally provides good support for deaf students, a decision by the superintendent threatened to disrupt the contracts for qualified educational interpreters. The young girl courageously spoke at a school board meeting about the

importance of having consistent interpreters. Her advocacy led to the board's frustration with the superintendent and resulted in a permanent change to protect the interpreter contracts.

Dr. Andrew Nash noted that the small sample size of children with hearing loss makes it hard to identify significant trends. He suggested that including more children in the report could help. The Department of Defense has hired otolaryngologists and partnered with the VA in the Tidewater area to perform cochlear and bone implant surgeries locally, reducing wait times for veterans who previously relied on community care. Staff are receiving updated training on cochlear implants, including programming, with sessions led by manufacturers. Dr. Nash explained that "community care" includes any healthcare services outside the VA, like primary care providers, nurses, social workers, and in-home care services.

PUBLIC COMMENT: There was no public comment.

STRATEGIC PLAN: The 2025-2026 Strategic Plan will be updated, the first in nearly six years. The Board reviewed the vision and mission statements, and performance indicators. Due to a limited number of today's interpreters will mean the discussion shall proceed as one group.

VDDHH's vision is a Commonwealth where deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind individuals can fully participate in life without communication barriers. Ms. Wolford noted that communication issues are central to VDDHH's challenges. Ms. Howard pointed out the omission of speech difficulties in the mission statement, which Director Raff emphasized VDDHH primarily serves the deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind. Ms. Brimm added that terms like "late-deafened" are important for accurately representing communication access needs. Staff and board members provided suggestions for "goals."

Director Raff reviewed the Code of Virginia which outlines VDDHH's responsibilities, including:

1. Informing and referring deaf individuals to local agencies.
2. Promoting cooperation and training among service institutions.
3. Providing technical assistance and training.
4. Making recommendations for improving state programs without formal evaluations.
5. Monitoring services and suggesting legislative changes.
6. Evaluating federal legislation affecting the deaf and hard of hearing.
7. Cooperate with Schools for the Deaf: Currently, there is no collaboration with the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind (VSDB).
8. Providing Technology Assistance Programs.
9. Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who are homeless.

NEW BUSINESS: There was no new business.

TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT

The travel forms were not distributed at the meeting, but Rhonda Jeter will follow-up with the Board when she returns to the office.

MEETING ADJOURNMENT

Being that there was no further business before the Board, the meeting adjourned at 3:40 PM (Karmon/Cline). Motion carried.