



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

Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
November 6, 2024

Members Present: Karen Engelhardt, Chairperson Carl Cline, Jr., Vice Chairperson Traci Branch Chris Gregory Kristin Karmon Aubrey Lipscomb Dr. Andrew Nash Dr. Cathee Wolford	Staff Present: Eric Raff, Director Brittany Howard, TAP Manager Rhonda Jeter, Business Manager Felecia Smith, Virginia Relay Manager Paul Stuessy, Community Services Manager
Members Absent: John Winstead, excused	ASL Interpreters/CART Provider: Lois Boyle, CART writer Elaine Hernandez, Interpreter Bernice Venuto, Interpreter
Visitors: Calvin Hogg, Health and Human Resources (HHR) Liberty University Interpreter Training Program students (8)	

On Wednesday, November 6, 2024, at 10:00 a.m., the members of the Advisory Board of the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH) met at the VDDHH Conference Room, 1602 Rolling Hills Drive, Suite 201, Henrico, Virginia 23229-5012.

CALL TO ORDER

At 10:02 a.m. Karen Engelhardt, Chairperson, called the meeting to order. Introductions were made for the members, VDDHH staff and visitors from Longwood University who were present. Communication rules were reviewed. A quorum was present, and the meeting proceeded. The roster was reviewed, and members were asked to provide any updates or corrections. Director Raff explained that there are two rosters – one is for the public (contains email addresses), and the second one is an internal document only because it contains home addresses and is not shared outside of the board. There were no changes to the agenda.

Minutes (version 2) from the August 28, 2024, meeting were reviewed, and a motion was made to approve with no changes (Wolford/Cline). Motion passed by consensus.

PROGRAM REPORTS

Executive – Eric Raff, Director

Director Raff announced newly appointed board members, Aubrey Lipscomb and John Winstead, and shared that two current members will have terms expiring in June of 2025. Additionally, Chairperson Engelhardt was recently reappointed by the Governor for a second term.

Director Raff shared a hard copy of the VDDHH Strategic Plan as well as an on-line version through the Department of Planning and Budget website. The Board contributed feedback and goals for the Plan at the August meeting. The performance measurements were updated to include seven new measures established under Governor Youngkin's administration.

Regarding the lease renewal, VDDHH will not be moving the office and plans to stay at the current location. The Division of Real Estate Services under the Department of General Services is in the process of negotiating a 10-year lease at the present site with the landlord. Some office renovations will be taking place as a part of the lease renewal process (e.g., equipment storage area and breakroom).

Director Raff provided the human resources update. VDDHH has 11 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions. Currently, there is one FTE position vacancy (Policy Analyst), and four of five wage (part-time) position vacancies. The positions are Regional Specialists positions in Fredericksburg and Richmond, with interviews recently conducted. VDDHH will also be recruiting soon for a part-time Fiscal Technician to take care of bills, invoices, and payments.

The Language and Disability Access Project is a new initiative under the Secretary of Health and Human Resources to improve disability and language access. The Disability and Language Access project will address accessibility for individuals with limited English proficiency and people with disabilities. This includes both spoken languages and sign language, and services such as interpretation, accessible publications, websites, and captioning. The VDDHH Management Team has been working on a draft of a language access plan, due by December or January, with the project to be ongoing over the next few years.

Director Raff reported that VDDHH recently trained its second cohort of Support Service Providers (SSPs) and deafblind participants. SSPs assist deafblind individuals with tasks such as grocery shopping that will promote independent living. Previously, Virginia lacked a statewide SSP program, prompting a successful two-year grant application through the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities. The initiative is a collaboration among the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired, VDDHH, and Reynolds Community College.

The second year of training, improved by a revised curriculum, included online and in-person sessions, involving 24 participants online and culminating in 18 trained SSPs. Currently, Virginia has 36 trained SSPs and 17 deafblind participants who are eligible to receive services. Deafblind individuals undergo orientation to learn how to use SSPs effectively.

The grant funding was set to expire on December 31, and an extension has been requested to use up the remaining funds, which will need to be expended by June 30, 2025. Funding for the SSP project is set to expire on June 30, posing a significant challenge to the program's continuation. Efforts are underway to secure additional funding, including applying for a grant from a foundation operated under DBVI. However, permanent funding solutions are still needed, and other grant opportunities are being explored to sustain the program.

Director Raff thanked Mr. Stuessy for taking up the reins of the Deaf Mentor program. He has been working actively with multiple families and hosting meet-and-greet sessions, although several families remain on a waiting list for services.

Last spring, a second cohort of deaf mentors were trained for the project, which focuses on supporting families with deaf children aged 0-8. Deaf mentors serve as role models, teaching American Sign Language (ASL) and introducing families to deaf culture and community. They work in the family's natural environment, ensuring the entire family—including siblings and extended relatives—can communicate with one another. Mentors also connect families to community resources, assistive technology, and other deaf adults, while sharing their personal experiences growing up as deaf individuals.

The program, now in its third year, experienced a vacancy in the Deaf Mentor Coordinator position after the previous Coordinator relocated to another state. Mr. Stuessy stepped in to manage those responsibilities, including arranging meet-and-greet events where families are matched with deaf mentors. Continued assignment of families to mentors is planned for November or December, hopefully reducing the number of families on the waiting list.

Interpreter Services – Eric Raff, Director

Director Raff reported in absentia of Karen Brimm, who is very involved in the SSP Pilot Project as the grant coordinator. She also serves as the liaison between the agency and the Virginia Department of Emergency Management and has been advocating for the language and access needs of residents in Southwest Virginia who have been impacted by Hurricane Helene.

HHR has initiated the Language and Disability Access Assessment Project. For the agency's plan, Ms. Brimm is handling the language access component, and Mr. Stuessy is guiding the disability access. He is also working towards an ADA certification.

Ms. Brimm applied for a grant through Idaho State and Gallaudet Universities entitled, "Promoting Equity in Healthcare Interpreting (PEHI)" with a goal of expanding the pool of interpreters who are trained to work in medical situations. VDDHH is now in the 4th to 5th year of the grant and two cohorts have completed the training. Those participants are now mentoring a new cohort.

Ms. Brimm, Danielle Bird and Amy Ashworth worked in collaboration to re-design and update the interpreter page on the VDDHH website for clarity and brevity.

There is a shortage of interpreters, not only in Virginia but nationally, and VDDHH will need a long-term strategy to create a pipeline for additional interpreters. There is a current service agreement in place, and VDDHH is in the process of writing a new contract which will be more competitive with community agencies that provide interpreter services. Since COVID, numerous interpreters prefer to telework or have retired which further complicates the shortage.

Mr. Cline commented about the importance of getting back to basics during emergencies (e.g., in-person) and to not rely solely on technology. Director Raff added that FEMA is strict about who can provide interpreting services under a disaster response.

Virginia Relay – Felecia Smith, Manager

The Virginia Relay has been very busy trying to prepare all Relay users for the inevitable digital transition, not only in Virginia, but across the US. Per the SEC, all the state-based regulations, rules and language apply only to analog relay services, resulting in a frustrating process. As phone lines are transitioned from analog to digital, many relay users will be left without viable telecommunications options, primarily TTY users (nearly half of relay users).

Ms. Smith and Director Raff have been working with HHR to amend the policy language to include digital services, enabling the creation of infrastructure to support TTY and text-based users. This will come at a cost

because the current contractor does not provide the service. VDDHH has been working to identify additional funding to support the initiative, which will require an additional service level from Hamilton, approximately \$185,000 in the first year, as well as additional services from another company at a cost of \$250,000.

The team is working diligently to ensure TTY users are not left without service. Ms. Smith and Ms. Howard have identified non-deployment funding available through the Department of Housing and Community Development but were given a directive to hold on pursuing the funds. Director Raff is working with HHR to emphasize the importance of the digital transformation and addressing the issue in a timely and proactive manner.

Virginia Relay trainings across Virginia continues, including working with 9-1-1 call centers. The department is facing a significant challenge with a proposed contract extension from Hamilton, which includes a large increase in service rates, especially for TRS services. There is a concern about the allocated funds for Relay, particularly given the shift to digital services and decreased Relay usage.

Hamilton hired a new Outreach Coordinator for Virginia, Meaghen Randolph, who has been successful in building relationships with 9-1-1 call takers and other emergency service personnel and brings great ideas to the table. Her efforts are leading to new requests for Relay trainings and helping to ensure consumer access to services.

Technology Assistance Program, Brittany Howard, Manager

Ms. Howard reported that there are ongoing vacancies in regions 5 and 7, and the interview process is underway to fill these positions. A centralization process for TAP applications has started, with all applications now reviewed, approved and entered into the database at the central office. Specialists can still assist applicants in person and can still approve applicants while in person if all required forms are present, if not, applicants are instructed to gather the documents and submit to central office.

Regarding reporting formats, the Regional Specialists now have read-only access to the database to prevent accidental edits, and all activity reports and referrals are entered directly into the TAP database. This simplifies the process, ensuring that only the actual invoice is sent by the contract holder, eliminating the need for sensitive consumer information to be transmitted via email.

TAP and Virginia Relay are working on expanding the TAP program to include wireless devices like cell phones and tablets, but a grant for this initiative is currently on hold. Many other state programs are already offering similar devices, and Virginia aims to follow suit.

The team has participated in several key outreach events, including the Black Business Expo, Telecommunication Equipment Distribution Administrators (TEDPA) conference, and the National Association for State Relay Administration (NASRA) conference, as well as a panelist opportunity. These events offered valuable networking and insight into new technologies.

Tablet Update: Both the Virginia Relay and TAP are facing challenges with the transition from analog to digital equipment. Many users are unwilling to accept outdated analog devices, but the current TAP budget cannot sustain the higher cost of digital equipment. This has created a difficult situation where the program offers analog equipment that consumers do not want, while also being unable to adequately cover the costs of necessary digital options.

Community Services – Paul Stuessy, Manager

Mr. Stuessy introduced Karen Rhoads, Community Services Specialist, who transferred from another position in August. The board members can email to Ms. Rhoads for information on topics such as hearing aids, ASL

classes, deaf events, etc. TAP has eight Deaf and Hard of Hearing Specialists who handle a variety of requests, including inquiries about hearing aids, ASL classes, deaf events and education/training.

Regarding Information and Referral (I&R), CSP had 203 requests and 21 outreach trainings, and served 955 people. This quarter, CSP, TAP and Relay handled 260 I&R requests and conducted 16 outreach training events, serving 377 individuals.

For the next quarter, four workshops on dementia are planned throughout the state with interpreters and CART provided. Director Raff and Mr. Stuessy attended National Association for the Deaf (NAD) Conference in Chicago and brought back a wealth of information and resources. Ms. Rhoads and Mr. Stuessy provided training to state police cadets. Other highlighted events were the Three Rivers Health District and Black Business Expo.

Deaf Mentor Program update: The previous Deaf Mentor Coordinator relocated to California. VDDHH has been recruiting for the position and received five applicants with interviews happening soon. The program is serving 62 families with 12 mentors and has a waiting list. The program endeavors to add 15 to 18 more mentors to cover the state. Efforts are focused on supporting the current mentors to ensure they meet with their families before Thanksgiving. The program is changing its recruitment strategy for deaf mentors by focusing on targeted outreach to meet potential candidates, particularly in areas that do not have a mentor, such as Southwest, Northern Virginia and Richmond. Training is provided in cohorts by SKI HI and is limited to 15 individuals at a time.

The staff and board further discussed the challenges in retaining Deaf Mentors and the barriers such as inconsistent hours, wage pay without benefits and a lack of stability, but the word is out there with hopes of finding people who can do this type of work. Ms. Smith mentioned that filling the Specialist vacancies, which are also wage positions, faces the same type of challenges. There is language in the proposed legislation that would change the Deaf Mentor Coordinator from part-time to full-time, helping to stabilize the program. Other proposals from VDDHH included additional funding for a staff interpreter that would also be available to the Governor's Office for press conferences and emergencies/disasters, which was a good selling point for the proposal.

BOARD REPORTS (WORKING LUNCH):

Mr. Gregory shared an inspiring story about his band being contacted by Waiting to Hear, an organization founded by a man with a deaf child who has a cochlear implant. The organization, which raises funds to support children with hearing loss, organized a mini tour featuring Mr. Gregory's band alongside prominent musicians, including members of Jimmy Buffett's band.

The tour included events in Knoxville and Bristol. The Bristol event had ticket prices as high as \$245 and had a massive turnout, raising significant funds for Waiting to Hear. Plans are already underway for a larger spring tour with stops in Bristol, Knoxville, Roanoke, and possibly Richmond, with Mr. Gregory hoping to rejoin the band for these events.

Dr. Cathee Wolford provides mental health and counseling services in Region 5 (Norfolk to Gloucester) and is seeking referrals to better support the community and meet the needs of deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Dr. Wolford has done extensive outreach, including distributing flyers and contacting various agencies, hospitals, and organizations like probation and parole, and Department of Justice. She encouraged referrals and business cards are available for those interested in sharing her information.

Traci Branch works at the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), but she serves on the board as a citizen who is deaf/hard of hearing. Her first concern is the shortage of qualified interpreters. Many skilled interpreters are transitioning to agencies, which increases costs for organizations like DARS due to higher fees compared to directly contracting interpreters. A new services agreement, administered by VDDHH, will impact DARS. Ms. Branch expressed interest in revisiting discussions about the interpreting agreements from previous years to explore potential resolutions.

Regarding voting accessibility, two individuals contacted Ms. Branch about their difficulties voting as individuals with hearing loss. One voter, using a text message on their phone to communicate, was initially misdirected to use headphones. This was eventually resolved but highlights a general lack of understanding. Ms. Branch acknowledged the challenge of providing interpreters at all voting locations but suggested exploring other accessibility solutions, such as sensitivity training and sharing resources at the voting locations. Ms. Branch proposed using upcoming elections as opportunities to pilot and refine accessibility strategies, aiming for a more inclusive experience by the next presidential election. Director Raff recommended that the two individuals share their experiences with the disAbility Law Center of Virginia and give specific feedback about what happened at their polling stations. Contacting the State Board of Elections and Virginia Board for People with Disabilities was also suggested.

Ms. Lipscomb is a new board member and was recently sworn in. Her deaf/hard of hearing daughter accompanied her to the swearing-in ceremony and was amazed at the building and the process. During the pandemic, her daughter provided valuable advice to someone who experienced sudden hearing loss due to COVID and received a cochlear implant. Her practical guidance on advocating for better programming of the device proved effective.

Ms. Lipscomb's daughter suggested having screens with closed captioning on airplanes to display important announcements, particularly when hearing devices are removed during flights.

Dr. Wolford added that she was invited by the Chesapeake Integrated Behavioral Healthcare Region 5 to present on Deaf Culture, Deaf Awareness and real-life experiences.

Dr. Andrew Nash will be leaving the Department of Veterans Affairs and accepted a new job as Territory Manager for Starkey Hearing Aids. He will be traveling across Virginia two to three days per week to visit contract sites.

Carl Cline shared that he is called upon often as others know about his membership on the Advisory Board to help them navigate deaf and hard of hearing services. Recently, young employees have reached out to him who were having trouble navigating the system. Mr. Cline assisted them in connecting with the right audiology group and she is now on track to receive the hearing aids that she otherwise could not afford. The Executive Director of the Roanoke Valley Speech and Hearing Center is resigning in December, and the board is in process of hiring a replacement.

Kristin Karmon provides early intervention services to families and discussed the state of early intervention in Virginia, where 40 different programs are individually managed. Ms. Karmon works with Henrico and Richmond. Richmond reached out to her because they are aware of her expertise in Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EDHI) and the availability of grants for infant programs supporting children with hearing loss. This led to a grant proposal that includes a parent support group, where parents can share experiences and resources, and a playgroup that integrates both spoken language and American Sign Language (ASL), with interpreters for both groups. This program will not be limited to Richmond and will include infant programs in the region. If the grant is received, hopefully the services will be on-going. Currently, there is no statewide

parent/infant program, and parents of children with hearing loss are often isolated, as there is no centralized resource or best practices program to connect them.

Chairperson Engelhardt reported on the importance of self-advocacy for accessibility when navigating the medical system and hopes that her experiences and positivity will help the next deaf/hard of hearing person. Mr. Stuessy mention the Dear Colleague letter for Health Practitioners.

Director Raff suggested strategies such as the interpreter flyers for medical professions and Clear Masks. There is a model used in Nebraska where doctors and lawyers pool funds through their licensing entities to cover the cost of interpreters and accommodations. Also recommended were Live Transcribe and the TAP list of resources regarding communication apps.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

PRESENTATION: “LEGISLATIVE PROCESS TRAINING, VIRGINIA GENERAL ASSEMBLY.”

Craig Markva, Assistant Secretary for Health and Human Resources, Office of the Governor, presented and provided copies of the Power Point hand-out. Mr. Markva also serves as the Legislative Liaison and reviewed the Virginia legislative process and how a bill becomes a law.

The Virginia General Assembly consists of 100 members of the House of Delegates and 40 members of the Senate and handles from 2,500 to 2,800 bills per year. Anyone can use the Legislative Information System (www.lis.virginia.gov) to learn about and track bills, as well as watch activities on the floor (which are both closed-captioned and recorded for play-back at a later time). Mr. Markva encouraged everyone to tour the Virginia State Capitol and General Assembly Building. Work can also be done by the GA by adding items to the state budget. Public comment is taken at the subcommittee level. The legislative process is intentionally difficult to make a bill hard to pass. Any bill having fiscal impact will need a Legislative Action Summary (LAS). Passed bills are “enrolled” and sent to the Governor, who has options on what actions to take (support, veto or amend).

If providing comment on a bill, Advisory Board members cannot speak on behalf of the Board and as a member. They can provide comments as a private citizen. All members must work within the bounds of the legislative process. Mr. Markva encouraged individuals to explain the benefits of a bill to their legislators and use personal stories.

VDDHH key roles and deliverables during the GA include providing LAS and Fiscal Impact Statements (FIS). The LAS has a 24-hour deadline. Director Raff clarified that VDDHH can lobby for agency bills if the Governor supports them but cannot lobby for random bills.

NEW BUSINESS

There was no new business. A motion was made and seconded to close new business (Nash/Wolford). Motion carried.

FUTURE MEETINGS AND AGENDA ITEMS

These meeting dates were set for calendar year 2025 along with tentative topics:

February 5, Early Intervention

May 7, Budget

August 13, to be determined

November 5 – Elections/Voting Accessibility/Sensitivity training

Chairperson Engelhardt asked the Board for other topics for further discussion:

Department of Corrections – ADA accommodations in jails and the intersection with mental health services

Department of Education – Educational services for K through 12 students with hearing loss

Department of Motor Vehicles – interpreters for drivers' tests (on the road)

Hearing aid and cochlear implant coverage by insurance companies

TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT

Rhonda Jeter explained that board members are reimbursed for reasonable and necessary expenses for their attendance. Overnight travelers are reimbursed for mileage and meals at the per diem rates (no receipts are required). Anyone can be reimbursed for mileage upon request. Pertinent travel forms were distributed and signed by the board members.

MEETING ADJOURNMENT

Being that there was no further business before the Board, the meeting adjourned at 3:07 PM (Gregory/Wolford). Motion carried.