



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

Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
May 7, 2025

Members Present: Traci Branch Chris Gregory Kristin Karmon Aubrey Lipscomb John Winstead Dr. Cathee Wolford	Staff Present: Eric Raff, Director Karen Brimm, IS Manager Brittany Howard, TAP Manager Rhonda Jeter, Business Manager Felecia Smith, Virginia Relay Manager Paul Stuessy, Community Services Manager
Members Absent: Karen Engelhardt, Chairperson Carl Cline, Jr., Vice Chairperson Dr. Andrew Nash	ASL Interpreters/CART Provider: Lois Boyle, CART writer Kay Davenport, Interpreter Elaine Hernandez, Interpreter Lorelei Schanstra, Interpreter Stephanie Webster, Interpreter
Visitors: Mya Wilcox, Department of Planning and Budget Beth Pross Elizabeth Leitch Bernice Venuto Khianti Martin, Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services	

On Wednesday May 7, 2025, at 10:00 a.m., the members of the Advisory Board of the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH) convened at the VDDHH Conference Room, 1602 Rolling Hills Drive, Suite 201, Henrico, Virginia 23229-5012.

CALL TO ORDER

At 10:00 a.m., board member Traci Branch, called the meeting to order, in absentia of Chairperson Engelhardt. Communication rules were reviewed. Introductions were made for the members, VDDHH staff and visitors. A quorum was present, and the meeting proceeded. The roster was reviewed, and members were asked to provide any updates or corrections. There were no changes to the agenda.

Minutes from November 6, 2024, meetings were reviewed, and being there were no corrections, the minutes were passed by consensus. Mr. Winstead reminded the Board not to forget individuals who are deafblind and those who provide support to them.

DEPARTMENT OF ELECTIONS AND VDDHH VOTER REGISTRATION

Ms. Howard provided an overview of the Disability Services Agencies (DSAs) and their role as voter registration sites. DSAs became designated voter registration sites after the National Voter Registration Act was passed in 1993, aiming for a more inclusive registration process. As such, they must offer an opportunity to any individual who receives their services to register to vote.

COMMONWEALTH BUDGETARY PROCESS

Mya Wilcox, a budget and policy analyst with the Virginia Department of Planning and Budget (DPB), gave a presentation to the Board about the DPB. Ms. Wilcox explained the organizational structure of the agency, how the budget bill is created, and what DPB does to develop and execute the budget.

PROGRAM REPORTS

Virginia Relay – Felecia Smith, Manager

On March 3–4, Virginia Relay was hit with a spike of misdialed calls. To address this, VDDHH took up Hamilton’s suggestion to roll out a bilingual Interactive Response System. This system automatically allows repeat callers through but informs first-time callers that they have contacted Virginia Relay and prompts them to press 1 to continue. In doing so, Relay slashed stray calls by 89%, session minutes by 76%, and costs by 76%. It was decided that the Interactive Response System would be kept as a permanent option. RCC requests have also decreased, though the reason is unclear.

Ms. Smith plans to mitigate any accessibility challenges posed by the analog-to-digital transition by ensuring that Virginia Relay users are well-informed. She met with Hamilton to explore adding programmed messages for analog CapTel and TTY users—brief pop-ups that explain how the upcoming analog-to-digital transition could affect their Relay service. Hamilton was hesitant to take a proactive role in the transition, pointing to low TTY complaint volumes and recommending mailings only to CapTel users—despite roughly 75% of such mailings in Virginia being returned undeliverable. It was agreed that Hamilton’s leadership would be consulted on adding a TTY end-of-call hot-key alert for the analog-to-digital switch. This alert would not only include information about the analog-to-digital transition, but also about new TAP equipment that can be used after the switch.

Meanwhile, Ms. Smith will work with Hamilton to augment the Relay outreach strategy, putting more emphasis on enlisting Deaf organizations and broadband providers so they can steer any users facing outages back to Virginia Relay. Ms. Smith also procured access to the Virginia Licensing Board database to compile a list of audiologists to inform them about TAP and Relay’s services, with hopes of increasing traffic across the board. As part of this campaign, Relay display stands will be set up in participating audiologist office. Another marketing strategy being utilized is interior bus ads that will inform TTY users about the changes with Virginia’s telecommunications systems.

Additionally, VDDHH’s contract with Hamilton will need to be renewed soon, and the cost per minute will increase.

During January through March, Ms. Smith took part in the Relay Partner training for Arlington Therapeutic Recreation, ATIA Conference in Orlando, Florida and co-presented along with Kevin Steffy (MD) on Telecommunication Equipment Distribution Program Association (TEDPA) to attendees, Relay Partner training

for Shelter House, Virginia Digital Opportunity Symposium, Relay Partner Training for Virginia Employment Commission, and many other events in Virginia and out of state.

Executive – Eric Raff, Director

Going through some general housekeeping updates, Director Raff informed the board members and staff there is a Secretary of Commonwealth publication, “2024 Blue Book” that lists all the Board and Councils appointed by the Governor. Except for some language in the budget bill, there have been few bills that affect the deaf and hard of hearing community-at-large. The 2024-26 Strategic Plan was provided to attendees to help management teams and the board stay focused on VDDHH’s goals.

The agency is still without two wage positions, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Regional Specialists for Richmond and Fredericksburg. However, the agency recently gained a part-time Fiscal Technician, as well as a temporary employee to assist Ms. Howard in organizing surplus TAP equipment. VDDHH is also recruiting a full-time Policy Analyst and Deaf Mentor Coordinator, which is also a full-time position as of July 1, due to an approved budget request.

Director Raff signed a Data Trust Agreement with the Office of Data Governance and Analytics (ODGA) that grants sharing of collective data (no personal information) in data management. In addition, Director Raff gave a NERF request to have DARS IT review three systems (ISP, TAP, VQAS) that do not meet VDDHH’s needs. VDDHH is also looking to create a data dashboard to document the performance of its services and demonstrate how public funding is utilized. Director Raff reached out to the DARS Communications Team to discuss VDDHH options in how to make improvements for the near future.

There was a recently completed training in the 3rd cohort of Deaf Mentors. Paul Stuessy, Community Services Manager, and Director Raff attended the Early Hearing Detection and Identification (EHDI) conference.

The budget bill requires that VDDHH provide a report on the telecommunications analog to digital transition and its services, due in September 2025.

During winter months VDDHH had power outages that slowed down Central Office operations. The Department of General Services collaborated with the landlord to create a new 10-year lease with minor renovations to the Central Office. The areas planned for renovations are the TAP storage room and staff break room, to occur in July-August.

Interpreter Services – Karen Brimm, Manager

Karen Brimm has been involved in a long-term HHR-led Language and Disability Access Initiative to improve access for individuals with limited English proficiency and disabilities. A formal Language Access Plan (LAP) has been drafted and will soon be open for public feedback on the VDDHH website.

The Support Service Provider (SSP) pilot is wrapping up. Ms. Brimm is compiling reports to demonstrate how the SSP program met grant requirements, including participant surveys and usage of metrics. A final training workshop is scheduled for late June in partnership with Reynolds Community College.

Ms. Brimm continues to be involved with Emergency Preparedness and Interpreting Services as liaison for emergency management activities and took part in training. She also briefed the VRID board on VDDHH’s processes for arranging interpreters if requested for the Governor’s emergency press conferences.

The Interpreter Services agreement is in need of an update, so Ms. Brimm is working on this, paying special attention to defining scopes of work and clarifying cancellation and payment policies. These edits are intended

to streamline interpreter service expectations. Regarding normal interpreter coordination, satisfaction rates stayed the same, although there was a slight increase in cancellations over the last quarter, perhaps due to frequent severe winter weather events. Danielle Bird, Interpreter Services Coordinator, was recognized for skillfully managing a high volume of complex requests.

VQAS testing volume dipped due to staff leave and some canceled or rescheduled tests due to weather. With upcoming renovations, VDDHH is partnering with regional institutions to support mobile testing statewide. If the proctoring locations would prevent a candidate from being able to take the test, reasonable extensions may be made when appropriate.

Finally, VDDHH is supporting a new statewide mentoring grant led by Reynolds Community College. The goal is to train experienced interpreters as mentors to support recent graduates transitioning to certification—an initiative seen as long overdue.

Technology Assistance Program, Brittany Howard, Manager

The TAP program is still seeking permanent hires for regions 5 and 7. A recent Richmond candidate declined the offer; Ms. Howard is temporarily handling all TAP responsibilities from both vacant positions while Paul Stuessy and Karen Rhoads assist with CSP-focused events.

Request for Proposal (RFP) bids for these positions will be reviewed, and if they do not meet the department's needs or if none are received, then recruitment to hire within will resume.

The TAP and CSP RFP was completed and posted in March, with a pre-bid conference on April 16. Current contracts expire on June 30, and the new contracts will be in place by July. Notably, the new contract includes liquidated damages for unmet performance metrics, which will increase accountability.

Outreach continues; Ms. Howard attended two conferences in the first quarter, representing VDDHH and TAP. Currently, she is updating the TAP brochure—revamping the FAQs and design. Hamilton Relay is drafting the new layout now, and it is expected to be presentable by the next board meeting.

Director Raff, Ms. Smith, and Ms. Howard attended the Virginia Digital Opportunity Symposium to see what other states were doing and to ensure that TAP's target population was not forgotten in digital opportunity plans. In that vein, VDDHH recently received approval to apply for funds to modernize TAP under the federal BEAD (Broadband Equity Access and Deployment) program. The TAP and Relay managers are now working out those enhancements, in which they hope to include Bluetooth personal amplifiers, bed shakers, Wi-Fi signalers with smartphone alerts, and wireless keyboards for use with tablets as a modernized TTY.

Both Ms. Howard and Ms. Smith asked that board members provide suggestions for what kind of technology they would like to see in the TAP program. Specifically, for those who are deafblind that can fall through the cracks between DBVI and VDDHH, the team wants to ensure that TAP has assistive technology available for them.

Community Services – Paul Stuessy, Manager

Paul Stuessy, CSP Manager, reported that between January and March, the eight regional TAP specialists handled 237 referral requests—primarily on assistive technology, interpreting, housing, ASL instruction, and event planning—while also doing 13 trainings, serving over 300 people. Additionally, the VDDHH headquarters alone served similar numbers. CSP assisted the public while working around language gaps for clients who knew limited English or ASL.

Some of the training events include five dementia-awareness sessions, a Medicaid-fraud prevention seminar, and a police workshop regarding interaction with the Deaf public and Deaf witness protocols. Additionally, VDDHH teamed up with PlanRVA to bring awareness to transit barriers in and around the city, and also to brainstorm how to overcome those barriers.

A SKI-HI training was held to educate people on how to be a Deaf Mentor, and that program graduated eleven new mentors. These new Deaf Mentors are sorely needed, as there are over three times as many families than there are mentors. Also, the deaf-blind SSP pilot received a six-month extension with a refresher workshop slated before the grant's conclusion on June 30, and the project group is pursuing added funding to continue the program.

Some members expressed interest in high call numbers for CSP, particularly relating to interpreter requests. It was clarified that the department's Interpreter Services Program coordinates interpreters, and that is only if the request is for a state agency. CSP can assist the general public with interpreter information and guidance.

VDDHH BUDGET AND APPROPRIATIONS

Rhonda Jeter reviewed the budgetary structure of VDDHH and employment levels of the agency. She went over the differences between the three types of funding – general, special, and federal – and how much VDDHH receives of each. General funds are the main operating budget. Special and federal funds are both encompassed by non-general funds, but federal funds are provided by the federal government, and special funds are collected from state tax revenues that are set aside for specific purposes. Communication taxes are the main source of special funds for VDDHH.

VDDHH is underspending all three funds in the current SFY 2025 budget. The primary reasons for this year's underspending of general funds are prepayments before the start of the fiscal year (to state agencies like VITA, DGS, and DARS), and position vacancies which decrease the amount spent on salaries. Special funds are also being underspent due to prepayments and staffing vacancies, but additionally because Relay use has decreased due to the transition to digital alternatives. The federal grants for the SSP and PEHI programs are also running under budget. Although prepayments were made in SFY 2024, they will no longer be permitted in SFY 2025.

Currently, 10 out of the 11 full-time positions at VDDHH are filled, with the aforementioned Policy Analyst position still vacant. VDDHH can also have as many as five part-time positions, two of which are filled. Once the Deaf Mentor position is converted to full-time, the agency's maximum employment level (MEL) will include 12 full-time positions, along with 4 part-time positions.

Concerning future fiscal years, VDDHH will submit requests this summer for a full-time staff interpreter and for the SSP program to be extended using general funds. If accepted by HHR and DPB, these changes will not begin until July 1st of 2026. A grant proposal has also been submitted to the DBVI foundation to extend the life of the SSP program for one year. Lastly, TAP has applied for a Department of Housing and Community Development grant for equipment.

The floor was opened to the Board for questions and comments. Mr. Winstead asked how the Board and the community at large clarify their needs to the Governor and increase chances of receiving funds. Director Raff responded that VDDHH's and other agencies' requests are being turned down simply because so many requests do not satisfy the Governor's priorities. Not everyone can have their requests accepted, but VDDHH will keep trying to secure funds for its vital programs.

Federal budget cuts may present a challenge, since they could affect federal VQAS funding; state VQAS funding will likely be unaffected.

BOARD REPORTS (WORKING LUNCH)

Kristin Karmon mentioned that Richmond Early Intervention Program had received a grant from the Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) program. The group had planned an event with the funds, but there was no interest from the community, so it was postponed. The Board proposed marketing strategies and offered to connect Ms. Karmon with groups that may be able to get the word out in hopes that the rescheduled event will have a greater turnout.

Chris Gregory discussed his open-heart surgery that accelerated his hearing loss. Mr. Gregory updated the group on his firearms safety and concealed carry class for the deaf and hard of hearing. Although his new hearing loss may present a challenge, Mr. Gregory's band will be going on another tour to fundraise for the organization Waiting to Hear. Since the previous fundraiser tour was incredibly successful, they will be joined by some members of Jimmy Buffett's crew.

The deaf and hard of hearing therapy group run by Cathee Wolford is seeking more members, so Dr. Wolford asked the Board to send any interested parties her way, including formerly incarcerated people.

Ms. Branch at the Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) is holding a summer program for Deaf and hard of hearing high school students to prepare for life after high school. It is geared toward career planning, exploring colleges, and exploring training programs, and will also include hands-on activities. Ms. Branch also expressed difficulty in finding interpreters, as well as underscoring how much the price of interpreter services is increasing. Others in the group empathized with the interpreter shortage and discussed different initiatives in other states that could be utilized in Virginia to increase interpreter numbers, such as training programs.

Mr. Winstead also agreed that there is an interpreter shortage and reminded the board of the special challenges faced by the deafblind with regard to COVID distancing, since the deafblind need in-person interpreters. If a program is created to train interpreters, tactile interpreting must be included as well.

Mr. Stuessy recognized National Interpreter Appreciation Day.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Bernice Venuto made a comment regarding interpreter involvement in the Advisory Board. Following up on a letter sent by interpreter Liz Leitch, Ms. Venuto appealed for an interpreter to be included on the board so they can better collaborate with deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing individuals to address challenges that affect the community. Since there is currently no open seat on the Board, Ms. Venuto proposed the creation of an ad-hoc committee which would include interpreters as well as members of the Board and VDDHH.

Khianti Martin commented that the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services is also struggling with the interpreter shortage. She requested collaboration with VDDHH for special concerns specific to her department, particularly inpatient stays and interpreter needs during those instances.

In reference to the conversations about interpreter shortages, John Winstead highlighted the unique interpreting needs for deafblind individuals. He expressed the need for more educational opportunities for tactile and protactile interpreters.

NEW BUSINESS

Dr. Wolford had questions about the earlier discussion about adding an interpreter seat to the board. She also spoke of how she wishes there were more participative activities and education events supported by both VDDHH and the Board.

Mr. Winstead brought awareness to June being Deaf-Blind Awareness Month and maintained that the community needs more information and resources to catch up with the modern day. Also, the White Cane Law was brought up, specifically regarding how it only really applies to hearing blind people. Furthermore, Mr. Winstead stressed the need for deafblind emergency management training.

FUTURE MEETINGS AND AGENDA ITEMS

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

August 13, to be determined

November 5 – Elections/Voting Accessibility/Sensitivity training

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 2:48 PM. Motion carried.