



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

**Advisory Board Meeting Minutes  
August 2, 2023**

**Members Present:**

Karen Engelhardt, Chairperson  
Carl Cline, Jr.  
Traci Branch  
Kristin Karmon  
Andrew Nash  
Tim Patterson  
Susanne Wilbur

**Members Absent:**

Chris Gregory

**Staff Present:**

Eric Raff, Director  
Karen Brimm, Interpreter Services Manager  
Brittany Howard, Technology Assistance Program Manager  
Rhonda Jeter, Business Manager  
Lynn Odom, Community Services Program Manager  
Felecia Smith, Virginia Relay Manager

**ASL Interpreters/CART Provider:**

Lois Boyle, CART writer  
Bernice McCormack, Interpreter  
Elaine Hernandez, Interpreter

On Wednesday, August 2, 2023, 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. Chairperson Karen Engelhardt called the meeting to order. A quorum was present.

Introductions were made for the members and staff present. Mr. Nash is a new board member from the Hampton Roads area. The board reviewed communication rules, membership roster and status of term appointments. The meeting agenda was review, with no objections expressed.

Minutes from May 2023 were reviewed, and a motion was made to approve with no changes (Cline/Branch). Motion passed by consensus.

### **FISCAL YEAR 2023 STATUS/FISCAL YEAR 2024 OPERATING BUDGET**

Rhonda Jeter, Business Manager, reviewed the fiscal budget structure and performance, and employment levels for the last fiscal year and the upcoming year.

There are three kinds of funding, allocated to VDDHH from the Department of Planning and Budget (DBP).

1. General Funds are where the state collects revenues from a variety of sources, taxes, interest, and fees. These funds are used for general state government operations.
2. Special Funds are revenue collected for specific purposes, such as the gas tax and that money goes towards improving our roads, highways and transit systems. Rhonda Jeter spoke about the special funds stemming from the Communication Sales Tax Fund that is appropriated for the VDDHH telecommunication and relay programs. Felecia Smith provided more detail on this subject and the sales taxes that are assessed on phone and internet lines. Special funds at VDDHH are utilized for the contract with Hamilton, education, outreach and training for individuals who utilize Virginia Relay services.
3. Federal Funds are in the form of grants to VDDHH.

The funds are appropriated by the General Assembly and cannot be mingled or altered. VDDHH is structured in three broad service areas, and then further defined by departments. Ms. Jeter and Director Raff briefly reviewed the different departments in VDDHH, e.g., the Technology Assistance Program (TAP), Virginia Relay, Community Services Program (CSP), Interpreter Services (IS), Virginia Quality Assurance Screening (VQAS), and Administration and IT/telecommunications (for staff). VDDHH employment levels at this time is eleven classified (full-time) positions, with ten filled and one open position for a Policy Analyst. Three of the four part-time positions are currently filled. The part-time positions are two Deaf and Hard of Hearing Specialists, Support Services Provider (SSP) Coordinator and Deaf Mentor Coordinator.

During last fiscal year, VDDHH had \$1.3 million budgeted in general funds, \$1.1 million was spent, leaving a balance of \$259,000, (81% spent). Unspent funds revert back to the state for other initiatives and projects.

Special funds - \$2.4 million was budgeted in special funds, spent \$1.6 million, leaving an unspent amount of \$780,000 (67% spent). Ms. Smith explained that as the technology is changing, relay usage is continuing to downtrend as localities transition from analog to digital, resulting in lower relay contract expenditures. Ms. Smith and Ms. Howard are working on strategies to get equipment during this transition that will fit the telecommunications structure and provide what the communities are asking for.

Special funds are administered by the Virginia Department of Taxation and any recognized savings will remain in that trust fund (e.g., the funds do not revert to VDDHH), ultimately going back to localities for their telecommunications needs such as 9-1-1, broadband expansion, internet services, etc.

In state fiscal year 2023, VDDHH spent 61% percent of the federal funds. Those funds operate under the federal fiscal year, which ends September 30, and there is no real concern at this time.

Looking forward to state fiscal year 2024, Ms. Jeter noted that the management staff is very efficient and thorough, and closely monitors program spending. They have been a critical part of budget development for 2024. There will be anticipated increases in costs of services from vendors, government rates for mileage, hotels, etc. As the number of employees increase, the associated costs of operations such as phones, computers, travel expenses, equipment and interpreters will increase also. VDDHH submitted a proposal package to HHR that would add a full-time, in-house staff interpreter, written by Karen Brimm, who explained the proposal in more detail.

The overall budget totals \$3.9M for the fiscal year 2024 comprised of \$1.3M in general funds, approximately \$2.4M for special funds, and \$195,000 for federal funds.

## **LEGISLATIVE PROPOSAL/DECISION PACKET OVERVIEW**

Director Raff explained that the current rate for interpreters assigned for behavioral health commitment hearings is capped at \$75. This creates a huge problem because of the additional paperwork and assignments. VDDHH will introduce legislation about the reimbursement rate, which fits into the governor's Right Help, Right Now initiative. VDDHH asked that they eliminate that \$75 dollar cap in the Code of Virginia and replace with language which will allow sign language interpreters to be compensated on an hourly basis, equivalent to spoken language interpreters, to ensure that deaf people in commitment hearings have access to effective communication.

Ms. Wilbur, licensed clinical social worker in the deaf and hard of hearing community, was pleased to hear about this progress even if it is a small portion of the mental health services in

Virginia. She stressed the concern that once an individual is a facility there are no services provided to them.

VDDHH submitted a decision packet to HHR to add a new staff position for a full-time interpreter, written by Karen Brimm. It is currently under HHR consideration and if approved, it will then go to the governor's budget staff. If approved at that level, it will become a part of the governor's budget bill. It is a long process and the position, if passed in the General Assembly, would not start until July 1, 2024 (fiscal year 2025). We believe that this proposal aligns with the governor's priority to increase efficiency in the state government.

Another goal is to propose that the Deaf Mentor and SSP Coordinator positions become full-time. Other long-term strategies are to update the Code of Virginia language pertaining to VDDHH and our role in interpreting and VQAS.

Mr. Patterson motioned to move the meeting ahead to the 1:15 p.m. slot, in order to hold public comments at 1 p.m., as scheduled. Mr. Branch seconded the motion. The meeting moved ahead to Program Reports.

## **PROGRAM REPORTS**

### Executive – Eric Raff, Director - Director Raff

VDDHH has recently filled three positions: Kris Obeck (Administrative Assistant), Melissa Forkner (Deaf Mentor Coordinator), and Adam Drake (SSP Coordinator). We are still trying to fill the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Specialist position in the Richmond area and will work on filling the Policy Analyst position. Lexi Hill was selected in the Governor's Fellowship program during the summer months and was assigned to HHR and VDDHH. She did research on behavioral health in Virginia and reached out to several therapists in the field. Her fellowship ended but she gave Director Raff the work that she had cumulated, and HHR is aware of the concerns surrounding behavioral health services for deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

Our current lease is coming to an end and an RFP will be going out for a new lease, meaning it is possible that the agency will need to move in June of 2025. There have been no changes in the Statewide Interagency Team. The state now has eight contracts for captioning, most are with colleges and universities, but also are available for K through 12 and agency work. Director Raff has also been involved with SELL R related to language development milestone assessments. VDDHH is also involved in a work group with RID to address legal interpreting and how to expand the pool of qualified interpreters by developing a new exam and bringing back SCL certification. Director Raff was invited to be on a panel for deaf in government and offered a state government perspective. He is on a workgroup with the Federal Communications Commission focusing on direct video calls to establish standard practices. Karen Brimm coordinated with the Department of Justice to host a webinar called, "ADA Effective

Communication Requirements in Healthcare Settings.” About 2,000 people participated and Ms. Brimm was on the webinar panel.

## **BOARD REPORTS**

Board member Carl Cline attended his first meeting as board member of the Roanoke Valley Speech and Hearing Center and will keep the VDDHH Advisory Board advised of any issues and plans for that group. Mr. Nash reported in his work at the Department of Veterans Affairs in the Hampton Roads area.

## **PROGRAM REPORTS**

### Virginia Relay – Felecia Smith, Manager

Felecia Smith noted in the charts included in the packet. The Virginia Relay Advisory Council has disbanded, as there was not enough interest.

TAP and Relay continue to work through the analog to digital transition for telecommunications in general and will garner input from community members with regards to the equipment that they may need and/or with issues related to relay services. The report listed all conferences and meetings attended in Quarter 4, and the Region 5 Specialist has been active in the community and Relay Partner trainings.

In response to complaints from the deaf and hard of hearing community about access to the Department of Social Services (DSS), Ms. Smith and Director Raff met with their leaders about what needed to happen. Because DSS contracts with several call centers, there was no Relay training to ensure that they are not hanging up on Relay calls. DSS will be implementing a train-the-trainer approach for all call centers and will be scheduling virtual sessions. They also asked for help in drafting language in their upcoming RFP for call centers. CSP is also involved to address in-person services, ensuring accommodations for deaf/hard of hearing and best practices. Ms. Howard will be presenting about TAP equipment.

RCC requests increased slightly compared to Quarter 3 and we are working on the best way to market RCC services. Ms. Smith is also addressing the broadband issue and utilize funding to create marketing materials and outreach such as hosting town hall meetings. Ms. Smith and Ms. Howard had the opportunity to attend the TDI Conference in College Park, Maryland. She attended the APCO/NENA conference regarding 9-1-1 and has been invited to attend their next training in September.

## **BOARD REPORTS**

Ms. Wilbur provides direct services for the deaf and hard of hearing in the community, and asked how can we make Virginia more attractive in order to get more professionals in the field? Traci Branch shared that she works for the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, focusing

on transition primarily. Ms. Karmon reporting that she has acquired new families with infants with hearing loss and early intervention. She attended the Opening Doors, Unlocking Potential conference in June.

## **PROGRAM REPORTS**

### Technology Assistance Program - Brittany Howard, Manager

Alissa Conover was hired as Regional Specialist for Region 6, and we are still searching for someone for Richmond and surrounding areas (Region 7).

We are still in negotiations with Empower 360, a federal program that offers tablets to consumers at a discount, as to avoid duplication of services. TAP is currently drafting a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Empower 360, which will be reviewed by procurement. Consumers, however, would not be eligible for both a reduced-cost tablet through Empower 360 and a \$30 discount through ACP for internet services.

The Smart Apps packet is ready to release, having received good feedback. Ms. Howard developed a list of equipment for the SSP project. TAP continues to prepare for the analog to digital transition because some equipment, such as TTYs, are no longer being made, and TAP is trying to identify solutions. TAP is also continuously working with procurement on the contracts for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Specialists with contracts continuing until 2025. Ms. Howard highlighted events attended through the last quarter and program statistics.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT**

There were no public comments.

## **PROGRAM REPORTS**

### Community Services – Lynn Odom, Manager

Ms. Odom noted that the Meet and Greet meetings held by Zoom meetings are working well to introduce the families and mentors. Some rearrangements were necessary because of resignations. Most of the mentors will be needed in the Northern Virginia area. We have nine deaf mentors, but plan to hire more since there are more families with deaf children requesting services. We plan to have new training for additional mentors to cover unserved areas. We are still receiving applications from families but do not have enough mentors at this time. Ms. Odom noted that she will be contacting SKI-HI to provide training to new mentors on using the curriculum.

Community Services has two new hires: Melissa Forkner and Adam Drake. Both come with experience in their field of expertise. Ms. Forkner is the Deaf Mentor Coordinator and stationed in Northern Virginia. Mr. Drake is responsible for the SSP pilot project and will be in and out of the office.

Community Services recently had an SSP training which was held in person and spanned two days. There were concerns about meals and transportation, and we close those two gaps for the next training. The SSPs finished their on-line training on August 2. The in-person training at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College include sighted guides at Wal-Mart with actual shopping by the Deaf-Blind consumers. Another issue was including pro-tactile in the training.

Discussion ensued about the turnover within the mentor program and continued recruitment efforts. We will coordinate with SKI HI to provide the next training in Virginia.

#### Interpreter Services - Karen Brimm, Manager

IS – The program continues to participate in the Promoting Equity in Healthcare Interpreting grant project and has the opportunity to recruit an additional cohort for this year. We potentially will have 15 interpreters graduating out of the grant project instead of 10.

Ms. Brimm continues to be involved with emergency management accessibility initiatives and attends quarterly meetings for their equity group which has gained the attention of the administration. Ms. Brimm provided a letter of support to the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities that would make the accessibility position permanent within the Virginia Department of Emergency Management. She also participated as a panelist on the Department of Justice's Healthcare Interpreting/Healthcare Communication Access webinar.

IS continues to have a fairly steady rate of request satisfaction. Our "no interpreter available" number is slightly higher this past quarter than it was the prior quarter. This may be due to interpreters who normally were available in other quarters were not as available during the end of the spring and into the summer. IS is hopeful that both the proposal for the staff interpreter and request for change in the Code of Virginia will be successful.

VQAS – The interpreter assessment numbers remain steady, with both interpreter performance and written assessments being provided by VQAS. The testing rooms now have new furniture, mobile carts, and a blue, contrasting backdrop resulting in improved recording conditions. Ms. Brimm and Danielle Hubbard attended the RID Conference, and the workshops were very good and offered a variety of topics.

#### **NEW BUSINESS**

There was no new business.

#### **AGENDA ITEMS**

The motion to accept the proposed 2024 meeting schedule with meetings to occur on the first Wednesday of the month. A motion was made to accept the schedule as presented (Karmon/Cline). Motion passed.

Director Raff mentioned some potential meeting topics: 1) The newborn and infant screening which operates under the Virginia Department of Health, 2) The Department Behavioral Health and Developmental Services which handles early intervention with families and of deaf infants and newborns; 3) Next Generation 9-1-1.

#### **TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT**

The travel forms were distributed and signed by the members requesting reimbursement.

#### **MEETING ADJOURNMENT**

Being that there was no further business before the Board, the meeting adjourned at 1:53 p.m. (Patterson/Karmon).