

Approved
05/01/24



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

Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
February 7, 2024

Members Present:

Karen Engelhardt, Chairperson
Carl Cline, Jr., Vice Chairperson
Traci Branch
Chris Gregory
Kristin Karmon
Andrew Nash
Tim Patterson
Susanne Wilbur
Cathee Wolford

Members Absent:

None

Staff Present:

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

ASL Interpreters/CART Provider:

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

Visitor:

Otis Hill, Sr.

On Wednesday, February 7, 2024, 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. Director Raff reminded everyone in attendance to adhere to communication rules.

Introductions were made for the members and staff present. Cathee Wolford shared that she graduated with her doctorate and her sign name is “Dr. C.” The agenda was reviewed.

Minutes from November 2023 were reviewed with one correction noted, and a motion was made to approve with correction (Patterson/Wilbur). Motion passed by consensus.

PROGRAM REPORTS

Executive- Eric Raff, Director

Director Raff discussed legislative activities within the General Assembly which is in long session this year. There are a lot of bills related to disability issues, especially in education. He highlighted specific bills related to deaf, hard of hearing and deafblind individuals, with two being connected to the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind, concerning law enforcement carrying firearms on campus, and expanding the Board of Visitors. Other bill is related to Medicaid coverage for hearing aid batteries and earmolds. Additionally, there was a discussion on proposed changes to payments to interpreters for deaf individuals involved in civil commitment orders, suggesting a shift from a flat fee of \$75 per day (including paperwork) to hourly rates like other spoken language interpreters. While the bill is not exactly what VDDHH wants, it is being monitored. Director Raff highlighted various legislative activities which overlap with individuals with disabilities and included listings of bills from two different sources that the board members can tap into if interested.

Regarding advisory board appointments, two members have terms that will expire this year and Director Raff asked that the board contact him if they know of any individuals who may be interested in serving on the board. He hopes to fill the seats in time for the August meeting.

Director Raff announced that Paul Stuessy was promoted to the Community Services Manager position effective February 10. The Policy Analyst position has a small pool of applicants and VDDHH will start interviewing this month. The Deaf/Hard of Hearing Specialist position is vacant and we will be advertising/recruiting for it soon.

Regarding the Support Service Providers (SSP) project, contracts were received and services began in late December. The operations manual was updated. This is a pilot project run by four people and is set to end in December 2024. Director Raff outlined plans to seek permanent funding for the SSP program through legislative means and if passed by the General Assembly, would start in the summer of 2025, which would leave a 6-month gap in funding and services. Director Raff met with the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (DBVI) to discuss other pools of funding which could possibly be used as a stop-gap measure.

The Deaf Mentor program currently has eight Deaf Mentors including the Coordinator who is wearing multiple hats. VDDHH is currently recruiting to expand the pool of mentors with 10 to 11 applicants. They will receive training for the curriculum program, SKI HI, which will happen at VDDHH in the next two weeks. The coverage will be statewide.

Director Raff elaborated on initiatives such as the Higher Education Access Project and efforts to encourage the use of captioning and audio descriptions for accessibility. He also outlined his

involvement in the Language and Disability Access Project, led by Health and Human Resources (HHR), which will delve into business practices of state agencies and ensuring language access. Director Raff is working with the Department of Education and Center for Family Involvement to update the Green Book, which is a parent resource guide for deaf and hard of hearing children and added pages on language assessment. He discussed ongoing efforts to update relevant documents and standards, including participation in a subcommittee focused on updating American Bar Association standards for interpreting.

Interpreter Services-Karen Brimm, Manager

Karen Brimm updated the board members on VDDHH's participation in the Promoting Equity in Healthcare Interpreting (PEHI) project. This project, spanning five years, involves collaboration with several other states and is overseen by Idaho State University. Currently, VDDHH is providing support to a second group of five interpreter participants who have recently completed their online coursework and are preparing for mentoring experiences. With this group, VDDHH will have a total of ten participants. Not all members of the initial group from last year completed the program, but we anticipate a higher success rate with the current group. There is uncertainty about whether a third group will commence next year; it may be delayed until the following year, likely in 2026, to allow other participating states the opportunity to engage their participants. VDDHH's collaboration with PEHI will continue, and the resources being developed will benefit the interpreting community.

Ms. Brimm remains involved in supporting the Support Service Provider (SSP) project as necessary. She welcomed questions regarding the legislative bill proposal concerning interpreter services in civil commitment cases. Although the wording of the proposal did not align exactly as desired, it represents an improvement in compensating interpreters for their challenging work. The current flat fee of \$75 has been a deterrent for interpreters, so any increase in compensation would be beneficial.

Regarding VDEM liaison role, Ms. Engelhardt expressed her enthusiasm for participating in role-playing scenarios with EMS providers in her own past, recalling her involvement in similar activities in the 1990s. She offered her availability to participate as a deaf individual if needed. Ms. Brimm clarified the difference between disaster preparation exercises and local EMS practice events. She discussed the importance of involving members of the disability community in emergency management scenarios to ensure proper support for individuals with accommodation needs.

Regarding Interpreter Services coordination, Ms. Brimm noted a slight reduction in requests over the last quarter due to holiday closures but highlighted an overall increase compared to the previous year, possibly resulting from efforts to increase awareness among state agencies and the court system about ISP coordination through presentations and outreach activities.

Ms. Brimm addressed a date typo in her report and provided an update on the VQAS materials revision. She expressed gratitude to their roster of interpreters and concluded by inviting questions from the board.

Virginia Relay-Felecia Smith, Manager

Ms. Smith reported that Quarter 2 has been very busy for the Virginia Relay. The Virginia Relay Advisory Council was disbanded due to lack of interest, but it will be replaced by virtual town hall meetings every quarter, with the first one scheduled for March 28. There will be a heavy focus on the analog to digital transition. She asked for the board members' input regarding how to engage the deaf and hard of hearing community in the town hall events and the times that are planned. Suggested outreach strategies included inviting TAP recipients, sending invitations to all relay users, and dissemination through various channels including e-news, support groups, hospitals/clinics and non-profits.

Relay minutes continue to decrease as expected with analog to digital transition. We want to see an increase in other services such as RCC and are reaching out to HLAA chapters to make sure that they are aware that RCC is an option.

Ms. Smith discussed the Universal Telecommunications Access Platform (UTAP), which is a pilot program that Virginia is participating in to test how to use realtime text (RTT) as an alternative for TTY users. She explained some of the challenges in transitioning from TTY to RTT services and engaging with organizations to promote RTT. The FCC will be meeting with the National Association of State Relay Administrators on February 13 to discuss the impact of digital transition on relay services.

There are funding challenges for the Affordable Connectivity Program and unless Congress makes an allocation, the applications for ACP will stop and funding will run out in April. We have been promoting ACP to Relay users and TAP recipients as a means to decrease their internet bills. Lastly, Relay saw an increase in speech-to-speech relay minutes following targeted outreach efforts.

Technology Assistance Program-Brittany Howard, Manager

Brittany Howard, Technology Assistance Program Manager, reported assuming customer service duties in Central Virginia due to a position vacancy in Region 7 (Central Virginia). She noted the arrival of iPads for TTY users during the analog to digital transition and a pause in the MOU agreement with Empower 360 due to the expected exhaustion of the Affordable Connectivity Program by April.

Regarding contracts, Ms. Howard and Ms. Smith have been diligently working to ensure a drafted contract is ready by June 2025 to avoid service gaps. The drafted contract includes provisions for liquidated damages for unsatisfied performance measures. They aimed to increase efficiency by centralizing TAP applications, which will also soon be available online.

Ms. Howard discussed updating the TAP restock request form to include outreach materials. She offered copies of the online application and restock request form and presented a list of events conducted in the last quarter, along with quarterly performance numbers.

During the Q&A session, Ms. Engelhardt raised concerns about older individuals' ability to upload information online. Ms. Howard assured her that applicants could submit required documentation via post mail. Ms. Engelhardt praised the simplicity of the process and asked if

users would understand how to use it. Ms. Howard clarified that the visual aids were primarily for specialists filling out the restock form.

Community Services Program-Paul Stuessy, Community Services Specialist

The Community Services Program (CSP) manages social media and e-newsletters, with e-news subscribers now at 456. Ms. Engelhardt asked about sharing their e-news link in other centers' newsletters like NVRC. Mr. Stuessy said it is up to those centers to decide.

Mr. Stuessy elaborated on their outreach efforts, including the use of QR codes at outreach tables to facilitate registration. CSP also handled a significant number of information and referral calls, totaling 509, addressing various concerns from technology assistance to questions about housing and hearing aids.

CSP held trainings for various organizations, including the Fredericksburg health district and Social Services. Mr. Stuessy recently finished an annual training for the ADA Coordinators with the Department of Corrections. Outreach at community events included the Deaf Pig Roast to learn more about community needs. The 2024 Directory of Services will be published soon. Dr. George Worthington with DARS will be providing workshops on dementia with interpreter services provided to share the information with the Deaf Community.

During the Q&A session, concerns were raised about access to information for deaf and hard of hearing individuals, particularly regarding health topics like dementia. Plans were discussed for workshops and outreach events, including the upcoming Deaf Expo at Dulles. Ms. Engelhardt suggested additional avenues for promoting VDDHH services, such as audiology clinics, libraries, and resource centers.

Working Lunch-Board Reports

Board member Chris Gregory has been teaching firearms safety classes, including Virginia conceal carry and firearms safety. Recently, he started offering these classes for the deaf and hard of hearing community at Safe Side Tactical in Roanoke, with interpreter Matt Burton. Mr. Gregory mentioned increasing class sizes and the program's popularity, with the largest class scheduled for the following Saturday. He expressed pride in pioneering this initiative, noted as the first-ever firearms safety and conceal carry class for the D/HH community, recognized by the NRA.

Board Member Susanne Wilbur announced her retirement. Ms. Wilbur stated her intention to continue teaching yoga while remaining involved in the mental health field, her true passion. She expressed her desire to explore opportunities to support and advocate for mental health services for the deaf and hard of hearing community in Virginia.

Board Member Ms. Cathee Wolford wears a blue hearing aid mold to show deaf children that deaf adults do exist, aiming to ease fears about mortality. She plans to visit schools wearing the earmolds to inspire deaf youth. She adopted the name sign "Dr. C" to show deaf children they can succeed in education. Ms. Wolford collaborates with the Red Cross to provide free fire alarm signalers to hard of hearing and deaf individuals in Newport News and Hampton, emphasizing awareness of the program.

Board Member Carl Cline is actively involved in the current legislative session. He emphasized the need for proper training for officers in interactions with the deaf or hard of hearing, alongside advocating for legislation concerning the Virginia School for Deaf and Blind. He encourages visiting the accessible General Assembly building and staying informed about bills, especially those concerning medical mistakes lawsuits, given turnover among delegates and senators.

The ensuing discussion underscored the importance of ongoing advocacy and collaboration to address accessibility barriers and ensure equal access to services and accommodations for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, particularly with the General Assembly and police departments.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Guest Otis Hill, Sr. discussed the challenges that his roommate, who has Usher Syndrome, experienced with the Social Security Administration. Although the person requested an interpreter in advance, Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) was offered on-site. The individual had a hard time seeing the interpreter due to the glare on the screen. The roommate has also tried to access services from DBVI and is frustrated with the amount of time it is taking to obtain services.

Director Raff directed the board members' attention to a second public comment in form of a email (included in the handouts) concerning cued speech.

PRESENTATION-ACCESS AND FUNCTIONAL NEEDS (AFN) -EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Jaime Liban, the Emergency Preparedness Development Coordinator at the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities (VBPD), highlighted the critical need to expand inclusive emergency management services for individuals with disabilities and other access and functional needs. This population needs to be fully included in all aspects of emergency management services, including preparedness, response, evacuations, sheltering and recovery.

Ms. Liban underscored the disproportionate impact of emergencies and disasters on people with disabilities, citing statistics that show higher rates of injury, death, inadequate housing, food insecurity, transportation challenges, and difficulty evacuating. Ms. Liban highlighted the challenges faced by the deaf and hard of hearing community in emergencies, including difficulties in receiving alerts and challenges in returning home after disasters. Ms. Liban acknowledged the expertise and contributions of Karen Brimm and Director Raff. Ms. Brimm actively advocated for inclusive emergency management practices and to ensure the continuation of this important work.

Ms. Liban expressed a commitment to listening to the perspectives and concerns of the community regarding emergency management preparedness and invited feedback from those present.

Over the past 18 months, efforts have been made to collaborate with other states, engage with the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM), work closely with the disability community and the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and develop best practices. Ms. Liban mentioned that a report with recommendations based on the research findings and collaborative efforts will be issued around June or July. This report will be critical in guiding future work in inclusive emergency management.

Ms. Liban highlighted the importance of gaining information directly from individuals and allowing their input to guide the work moving forward. This community engagement is seen as foundational to the work of inclusive emergency management and disability rights advocacy. She invited feedback and input from those present.

Concerns were raised about police communication with deaf and hard of hearing individuals, emphasizing the need for specialized training, sensitivity and cultural understanding. The conversation expanded to board members' experiences with first responders and the importance of inclusive training scenarios. Issues concerning the usage of unqualified sign language interpreters during emergencies were also discussed.

The speakers shared their varied experiences with Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) during healthcare emergencies. Challenges included reliance on family members for interpretation, VRI not meeting communication needs in certain circumstances, and technical issues.

Director Raff expanded on the challenges of using Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) in medical settings, such as incremental billing, the quality of interpretation, and unstable internet connections. Ms. Brimm shared that during COVID, the vaccination centers had contracted with a VRI vendor which included providing communication access to the deaf and hard of hearing communities and ensuring ADA compliance to meet needs. In Tidewater, a staff interpreter was onsite every day due to the large population of deaf/hard of hearing in that region. Fortunately, the planning that went into COVID is being used to ensure that the communities are better prepared for hurricanes, tornados, etc.

Statistics were discussed related to the difficulty among the deaf and hard of hearing community in obtaining recovery assistance and returning to their homes. On a positive note, FEMA has a proposed rule going into effect soon which has improvement to recovery services for people with disabilities. The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies is a lead organization doing amazing things including operating a hotline. CMIST in California and Colorado is also leading in inclusive emergency management. Board members offered additional feedback related to notification, sheltering, evacuation and recovery. Suggested strategies from the board included assistive technology in shelters, providing direct ASL communication through disaster hotlines, flashing carbon monoxide alarms, and sending direct notifications to D/HH individuals during emergencies by their local police departments. NOAA weather radios were also discussed, which is a recurrent theme.

Ms. Liban will be looking at a state model for sheltering, including accessibility, to share with localities. Efforts are being made to educate emergency management about full inclusion and integration for individuals with disabilities as disasters have a disproportionate, negative impact

on their lives, such as food shortages, unsanitary conditions, and displacement. The next steps of VBPD will be focus groups, surveys and continued feedback from stakeholders. Ms. Liban will review these findings with VDDHH and the board.

There was a question about Smart 9-1-1. Director Raff will invite VDEM staff to present about Text to 9-1-1 and Next Generation 9-1-1. Ms. Smith mentioned that VDEM has a dashboard to track the deployment of Next Gen 9-1-1. This dashboard provides information on which areas have implemented Next Gen 9-1-1, which is still under development, and the projected deployment timelines. She also explained how Next-Gen 9-1-1 improves accessibility for Relay calls by using geolocation to determine the caller's current location when they use a cellphone. This allows interpreters or Communication Assistants (CAs) to relay accurate information to 9-1-1.

NEW BUSINESS

There was no new business before the board. Director Raff reviewed future agenda items: inviting a presenter from VDEM to discuss Next Gen 9-1-1, VDDHH Diversity Plan, Agency Strategic Plan (due May 31), and Language and Disability Access Plan (due in June). He invited board members to share any other pertinent topics that they would like to have on the agenda.

TRAVEL REIMBURSEMENT

The travel forms were distributed and signed by the members requesting reimbursement for those members who travel more than 50 miles. Overnight guests will also be reimbursed for meals at the per diem rate. Travel expenses must be both reasonable and necessary to conduct official state business. Additionally, all Conflict of Interests forms were filed by the due date of February 1st, and the board members were praised for their timely submissions. The board was reminded to complete the mandatory COIA training by March 1st.

Next meeting will take place on Wednesday, May 1, 2024, at VDDHH. Subsequent meeting dates for 2024 are August 7 and November 6.

MEETING ADJOURNMENT

Being that there was no further business before the Board, a motion was made and seconded to adjourn the meeting at 3:25 p.m. (Branch/Cline). Motion carried.