



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

Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
November 5, 2025

Members Present: Karen Engelhardt, Chairperson Carl Cline, Jr., Vice Chairperson Chris Gregory Kristin Karmon Aubrey Lipscomb John Winstead Dr. Cathee Wolford Dr. Andrew Nash Traci Branch	Staff Present: Eric Raff, Director Karen Brimm, IS Manager Rhonda Jeter, Business Manager Paul Stuessy, Community Services Manager
Members Absent:	ASL Interpreters/CART Provider: Lois Boyle, CART writer Lorelei Schanstra, Interpreter Heather Kubitski, Interpreter Stephanie Webster, Interpreter
Visitors: Corinna Lawson Faith Vranes Matthew Wright Nina George Eden Svoboda Bernice Venuto	

On Wednesday November 5, 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., Chairperson Engelhardt called the meeting to order. 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 the August 7, 2025 meeting were reviewed. Dr. Wolford asked for clarification on a previous visitor's comment about a designated interpreter profession representative on the board. Eric provided more information about this, and the minutes passed (Lipscomb/Cline).

PROGRAM REPORTS

Executive – Eric Raff, Director

The legislative report for the state budget bill discusses Virginia Relay's transition from analog to digital telecommunications. This report has been sent to the General Assembly, but it is still being reviewed by HHR.

Office renovations have been completed, and operations have since returned to normal.

Interpreter Services – Karen Brimm, Manager

Ms. Brimm is still looking to fill the Interpreter Services Coordinator position, so she is continuing to do both her managerial job and the job of the coordinator.

In July, Ms. Brimm held a feedback session for interpreters to address the comment from a previous board meeting – getting feedback from the interpreting community. The meeting was not solely made up of interpreters; DARS representatives and Deaf community stakeholders also attended.

Along those lines, Ms. Brimm met with representatives from the Virginia Association of the Deaf to answer some questions they had about emergency management, interpreters for press conferences, and other topics. Ms. Brimm wants to keep an open line of communication with the Virginia Association of the Deaf as well as with the Virginia Association of the DeafBlind (VADB).

While Ms. Bird was still here, she, Dir. Raff and Ms. Brimm were able to attend the annual Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf Conference.

Ms. Brimm and IT are still working to create an online interpreter request form to eliminate the manual data entry required of the current form. She emphasized that the form would require a Captcha to prevent bots, and as an extra precaution, the online form would be screened by Ms. Brimm herself or the coordinator. They are hoping to start conducting a beta test for the form within the next month. Beta testing will be internal first to ensure it is user friendly before it is opened to the public.

Ms. Brimm opened the floor to anyone who wanted to see certain data from the interpreter services program.

Mr. Winstead mentioned the need for more training and funding for tactile and pro-tactile interpreters for the deafblind.

VQAS testing had been conducted outside the office because of renovations. Ms. Brimm commends the VQAS Coordinator, Amy Ashworth on her flexibility during this time. During the renovations, though, the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment test schedule was put on hold, as the test does not belong to VDDHH and could not be relocated; this was very unfortunate because some people traveled to VDDHH from out of state to take that test. Luckily, this test has been resumed.

Phase one of the language and disability access assessment project – an HHR project – will be ending with the Youngkin administration. Because of this project, VDDHH has developed a language access plan and set up an iPad with captioning that is made available to the entire office.

Ms. Brimm is grateful that Ms. Frazier will be serving as Public Information Office to liaison with VDEM so that emergency management-related responsibilities can be shared in the future. Concerning emergency management, Mr. Winstead brought up the lack of emergency support given to the deafblind. Ms. Brimm agreed that these concerns were important and offered a possible partnership with VADB in order to provide information and training to the deafblind so they know what to expect if they ever need to go to an emergency shelter. Additionally, she proposed training for interpreters on the subject of emergency management. Unfortunately, there are some challenges in setting up these trainings – funding hurdles, few Deaf-informed training providers, and limited time resources being a few; however, these are actions that Ms. Brimm is hoping to implement.

Ms. Brimm has sought feedback from interpreters and has taken the first steps toward making an interpreter work group.

Lastly, Dr. Wolford asked Ms. Brimm if she had heard about “DHH” being put on driver’s licenses for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Ms. Brimm had not heard about this, but she and Eric said they would follow up on it with an ADA representative and the DMV.

Virginia Relay – Felecia Smith, Manager

Dir. Raff gave the report in absentia of Ms. Smith. Dir. Raff gave the report in absentia of Ms. Smith. Consumers have expressed confusion as some internet service providers start changing their lines from analog to digital. VDDHH has contacted the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to get in contact with internet service providers. That way, internet service providers can be informed on what the transition means to their consumers, hopefully informing those consumers along the way.

Relay has started using an Interactive Response System (IRS) – not the tax service, but a program designed to weed out spam callers. The system simply requires a caller to press 1 to get to Relay. Once Relay users make it through the system once, they are automatically recognized by the system in the future and do not need to go through IRS again. This has been successful so far, and it has cut costs significantly.

Relay continues to focus on training 9-1-1 call centers. 9-1-1 operators need to be able to recognize Relay calls.

Hamilton has agreed to decrease the advance request period for RCC (remote conference captioning) from 48 hours to 24 hours. Additionally, Relay has been considering expanding the use of RCC to deafblind consumers, since captions may be more accessible than video. Mr. Winstead then shared an experience he had with Relay, emphasizing that sometimes deafblind people are not used to the system. On a related note, Dir. Raff mentioned that many emergency call centers now use text to 9-1-1, and a map of participating counties could be found through VDEM.

Technology Assistance Program -- Brittany Howard, Manager

Dir. Raff gave the report in absentia of Ms. Howard. Three regions still do not have coverage regarding TAP, so Ms. Howard continues to cover those. The Southwest VA region has a new provider, Bridges for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, based in Tennessee. Ms. Howard traveled to Southwest VA recently to train this new provider.

Ms. Howard is trying to merge the two vacant positions in Regions 5 and 7 into one full-time position. The decision package for this has been approved by HHR and we are awaiting further approval from the Governor’s Office and Department for Planning and Budget.

Weather warning equipment was purchased for consumers, but half of the equipment received was faulty. After sending the bad equipment for repair, VDDHH received it back in September, all functional. They are now ready to distribute.

Ms. Howard has sent out two surveys. One was sent to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Specialists for feedback on TAP operations, and the other was a community survey regarding consumer equipment preferences.

Community Services – Paul Stuessy, Manager

CSP has been busy with training, events, and information & referral. Between August and November, CSP did 4 outreach events and conducted 13 trainings. They were particularly drawn to events and trainings concerning aging. They also trained 80 cadets for interaction with the Deaf, and tabled booths at two Remote Area Medical events in Newport News and Grundy.

Karen Rhoads traveled to Salem to train the local police department on communication with the Deaf ahead of a football game featuring Gallaudet University. Also in the Roanoke area, Ms. Rhoads visited the Roanoke College infirmary and trained workers and students about how to identify and work with Deaf and hard of hearing patients.

To celebrate Deaf Awareness Month in September, CSP tabled a booth at NVRC's Celebration of Communication.

Regarding EMS training, Mr. Stuessy noted that CSP does receive calls and training requests from EMS workers, but getting groups together to train has proven difficult as EMS are always on the go. However, they have provided communication cards to aid in their interactions with deaf and hard of hearing people they meet.

The Deaf Mentor program is thriving with 64 families being mentored by 16 mentors, with another 15 possibly on the way in February. The areas most in need of mentors are western Virginia (Roanoke, Lynchburg, Lexington) and the tidewater region. CSP is still recruiting for the Deaf Mentor Coordinator position; one candidate has dropped out, but another is going forward with the next interview. Mr. Stuessy has been performing the role in addition to his own, meeting families and placing mentors with them.

Ever since the SSP project ended, VDDHH has been getting calls and questions about alternatives they can use while the program is on hold. CSP has been directing them to a directory on the VDDHH website that lists the SSP providers in Virginia. Mr. Stuessy hopes that services can begin again next July.

WORKING LUNCH - OFFICE TOUR AND BOARD REPORTS

Mr. Winstead has been busy, having been to the General Assembly and deafblind camp. He also presented at the VADB Annual Conference about how to talk to your legislator. Lastly, he has been advocating for deafblind access around the state, specifically in NOVA

Mr. Gregory recalled an incident between the Roanoke police and a possible Deaf or hard of hearing person; he attempted to get some more information about that from Roanoke police, but ultimately no one responded to his request. In other news, the Waiting to Hear band tour occurred, and there was a big turnout for it.

Dr. Wolford was invited to give a 2-3 minute presentation on Deaf culture and domestic violence, but she was only given one day of advance notice. She has been working at Newport News Community Services Board for

three years, and she still needs more people. She has posted two videos – one for people with hearing loss and one with a signing caption for Deaf and hard of hearing people – in hopes of getting more clients, especially seniors. Also, Dr. Wolford has noticed that many people struggling with hearing loss do not want to be called Deaf or hard of hearing. She has been partnering with these people to find plays and musicals that are accessible via sign language or captions. The Board discussed different options in the area for captions and interpreting at shows. Mr. Stuessy mentioned that VRID is creating a calendar of events for the state of Virginia so people can check the website for things to do. Dir. Raff brought up Access Virginia, a Tidewater organization that focuses a lot on captioning theatre. Lastly, Dr. Wolford went to the police station for a Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) meeting, but the station uses an auditory intercom which was not accessible to her and the staff refused to come to the door to let her into the meeting.

Since October 17, Ms. Branch has been working on the road because of the DARS move with the return to the office being phased in. There has been a change recently with getting interpreters for the agency; whereas in the past, they used to hire freelance interpreters, they now have to go through interpreter agencies. This leads to them not knowing which interpreter they are getting or the interpreter's skill level. It is also becoming more work to request an interpreter because they have to go through procurement to do so. Interpreting agencies are also adding fees for simply requesting an interpreter now, which makes them more expensive. DARS has been slightly impacted by federal budget cuts.

Ms. Karmon has been doing early intervention to support people who want ASL skills as well as a cochlear implant for spoken language skills, but she had one family be told to stop signing after a cochlear implant. In response, she put together an information packet about why signing is still important even after a cochlear implant, and she plans to send it to the medical community that has been telling families otherwise. Mr. Stuessy thanked her for including the Deaf Mentor brochure in her packet, since most participants are coming from referrals.

Dr. Nash informed Dr. Wolford that the HLAA will be having another meeting soon that is not in a locked police building. The group has grown since COVID. Virginia has begun its own academy of audiology that is separate from speech; this is good for the audiology profession, but a loss for the speech-focused professions. He is still receiving calls from Chesapeake looking for a teacher of the Deaf, and he asked the Board to let him know if there are any recommendations.

Ms. Lipscomb discussed a hearing evaluation her daughter got at VCU in which an audiology student not only gave her daughter an unrealistic hearing score, but also asked when she was getting a second cochlear implant, which was an inappropriate question. A second evaluation at UVA confirmed that the first was not performed correctly. The cochlear implants are working very well for her daughter.

Mr. Gregory has an upcoming cochlear implant consultation.

Mr. Cline was proud to see an article about how VDDHH's work with Roanoke College led to an increased interest in learning sign language.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no comments from the public.

LEGISLATION & POLICY

Kathleen Frazier formally introduced herself to the Board as the new Policy Analyst at VDDHH. In her first two months on the job, she has begun developing a manual for the Board that can help with their responsibilities. The first section will cover basic information and responsibilities for being on the Board. Section two will focus more on policy – for instance, FOIA, the Code of Virginia, and Board policy. Of course, there is also information of VDDHH information such as performance reporting, budget, contact information, and the strategic plan. Lastly, there is a section where Board members can keep all previous agendas and minutes in the back. Ms. Frazier plans for the binders to evolve over time by adding agendas and minutes for each meeting. This will give everyone time to get all useful information, and it can be used to help guide the advising of the agency.

Ms. Frazier asked for volunteer members who can meet with her before the next meeting to discuss bylaws and what may or may not need to be changed. Volunteers were Mr. Cline and Dr. Wolford. She is still looking for a third volunteer. Dir. Raff suggested adding a motion to set up the Bylaws Committee.

Regarding FOIA, Ms. Frazier explained that boards need to have a FOIA policy specifically for virtual meetings. She is working on this and will send it to Board members before the next meeting.

VDDHH has updated the TAP Regulations in order to reduce regulatory burden on those who utilize VDDHH's services, as required by Executive Order 19. This does not change how TAP operates; it only clarifies and consolidates the Regulations. The reduction has been submitted in the online Town Hall system; various levels of review will occur through the executive branch. If it receives all the necessary approvals, it will be subject to a 30-day public comment period.

Ms. Frazier has also created a Code of Ethics for VDDHH employees, contractors, and representatives of VDDHH – including Board members. The Code of Ethics was signed by Board members and copied so they could keep the form in their records. VDDHH's internal social media policy was also updated to reflect current policies.

There are currently no proposals that VDDHH is working on submitting for the upcoming 2026 legislative session. Board members were instructed to start thinking about possible legislative proposals for the 2027 legislative session, and those ideas can be discussed at the February Board meeting. Ms. Frazier also asked for the Board to provide her with legislators that have advocated for Deaf issues in the past; this will make it easier for her to find a sponsor for any potential legislative proposals. For the upcoming 2026 session and how bills could affect the Deaf community, VDDHH will distribute that information in the e-newsletter called Legislative Watch. Mr. Winstead would like to be updated on any bills especially relevant to the deafblind so he can make sure the community is included in those bills. The timeline for the 2026 General Assembly was provided to the Board.

Ms. Frazier met with a constituent to answer questions about legislation regarding current hearing aid coverage as well as the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind (VSDB). She provided resources to the constituent on how to contact and meet with their representatives, as well as providing hearing aid resources throughout Virginia. Regarding VSDB, Ms. Frazier explained that the school is not permitted to advertise, and the way that a student gets transferred to VSDB is if their school allows them to transfer; it is not up to the student or parent.

Lastly, Ms. Frazier provided an overview of VAD’s legislative and policy efforts, one of which is a captioning bill.

2024-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN UPDATES

Updated strategic plans for state agencies are due by November 18. Dir. Raff reviewed some of the items on the current strategic plan. Equipment modernization is already in progress, and this is being accompanied by a new contract position to help clients use that equipment. The real-time text (RTT) proposal for VA Relay was not approved, so it was deleted from the strategic plan. VQAS material might be changed in the document, and VDDHH may pursue becoming an RID testing site. Other subjects include a VDDHH staff interpreter, software updates, and a possible assistant for the Deaf Mentor Coordinator. Two objectives were put on hold: the SSP program (which has not received funds to continue) and a transportation study. The SSP Project will hopefully be included in the next strategic plan, assuming the funds are granted. Rewording of the outreach section of the strategic plan was discussed, and it was agreed that it would be reworded in the next strategic plan. The revised strategic plan will be reviewed at the February meeting.

OPEN DISCUSSION AND NEW BUSINESS

Mr. Winstead asked the Board if there is a way to get interpreters from VRS to widen the pool. Ms. Branch responded that it is an option, but it is not always ideal. Ms. Englehardt agrees, noting that the signing is not always accurate and that sometimes the connection is unstable.

Dr. Wolford proposed that there be a section on the agenda where questions and discussions from previous board meetings can be followed up on. How this will be done was subject to debate. Dr. Wolford suggested an “Old Business” section, Dir. Raff suggested an action item, and Ms. Brimm suggested using SharePoint task manager.

It was clarified to the Board that the agendas for upcoming meetings are included in packets that have been both printed and emailed to the Board.

ELECTION

A motion was made to nominate Aubrey Lipscomb as Vice Chairperson (Branch/Cline). A second motion was made to nominate Carl Cline as Chairperson (Karmon/Branch). The motions passed unanimously.

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). Any board member 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 3:40 PM (Karmon/Lipscomb). Motion carried.