



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

**Advisory Board Meeting Minutes
August 13, 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	Staff Present: Eric Raff, Director Karen Brimm, IS Manager Brittany Howard, TAP Manager Rhonda Jeter, Business Manager Felecia Smith, Virginia Relay Manager
Members Absent: Traci Branch	ASL Interpreters/CART Provider: Laura LeBlanc, CART writer Judy Bradley, Interpreter Briana Davis, Interpreter Bernice Venuto, Interpreter Stephanie Webster, Interpreter
Visitors: Terri Nelligan, Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services Lex Dance, Fiscal Technician Jeanne Lavelle, Virginia Association of the Deaf Cindy Burton, Virginia Association of the Deaf	

On Wednesday August 13, 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. Lex Dance was introduced as the recently hired Fiscal Technician for VDDHH. 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 May 7, 2025 meeting were reviewed, and being there were no corrections, the minutes were passed by consensus (Wolford/Cline).

FY26 OPERATING BUDGET

Rhonda Jeter reviewed and contextualized the budget surplus at the end of fiscal year 2025. The surplus was mainly due to vacant positions, prepayments from FY 2024, and a decline in Relay call volume. Ms. Jeter discussed the ways in which the agency plans to spend-down the appropriated funds in state fiscal year (SFY) 2026. Looking ahead to SFY 2027, the VDDHH budget proposals were listed. These included a permanent SSP program, a full-time staff interpreter, a combination of two part-time TAP positions into one full-time position, and increased funding for Virginia Quality Assurance Screening (VQAS) program due to federal budget cuts.

INFANT-TODDLER CONNECTION (EARLY INTERVENTION)

Terri Nelligan presented about early intervention for deaf and hard of hearing children ages 0-3 years. The purpose of this intervention is to support Deaf and hard of hearing children in their early development and ensure that they have a chance to develop at the same rate that their peers typically would. Ms. Nelligan also talked about eligibility requirements for the program and how to refer a child to the program (making them automatically eligible). She also informed the Board about timelines for early intervention from referral to session number one. She described sources of funding for early intervention programs and payment options, emphasizing that they do not deny anyone services due to inability to pay.

BOARD REPORTS (WORKING LUNCH)

Dr. Nash spoke on the shortage of audiologists in the country. There are not nearly enough audiologists to fill demand, and while that allows audiologists a wide selection of places to work, it is not good for meeting the needs of the community, especially when it comes to public schools; private industries tend to pay better than public ones.

Mr. Cline added that his hospital has recently added a pediatric clinic. Additionally, the Roanoke Valley Speech and Hearing Center has received a new executive director who has made some very good changes so far.

Ms. Karmon clarified how private companies contract with the state early intervention programs. She talked about the need for more consistent services as well as a database to assist parents of deaf and hard of hearing children in finding reputable goods and services. Dr. Nash echoed these remarks. Ms. Karmon also explained how she needs 10 hours of continuing education a year to maintain her state license, and 30 hours of continuing education in three years to maintain her national license.

Dr. Wolford's practice is still looking for more deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing clients. Her practice is searching for anyone with hearing loss as well, such as seniors. She detailed that she has had success with people with hearing loss, alerting them to the existence of speech-to-text software and informing some of them that they could in fact benefit from hearing aids. Of course, she cannot apply for hearing aids for them, so she's been encouraging them to advocate for themselves.

Due to his increased hearing loss, Mr. Gregory reported that he will not be part of the band tour that he mentioned at last meeting.

Mr. Winstead touched on his endeavors in voice training, since he didn't know that his speaking voice was so loud. Whispering was also unfamiliar to him. On another note, he discussed the struggles of the deafblind community since the SSP project was defunded. While he recognizes that VDDHH is not at fault for the lost

funding, he is trying to educate the deafblind population on the end of the program. Additionally, he is researching and rallying support for the co-navigator program.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Jean Lavelle and Cindy Burton from the Virginia Association of the Deaf (VAD) brought up the need for a master calendar for community events and police training to interact with deaf citizens. Specifically, due to a major football game between Gallaudet and Roanoke College, Ms. Burton and Ms. Lavelle are concerned about the increased likelihood of police interaction between the high number of deaf people who will be in Roanoke for the game. The organization has attempted to contact the Roanoke police department with these concerns and received no response. Mr. Winstead echoed these comments, mentioning how he got a new ID card and was worried about how police would treat him if they were not aware that he is deafblind.

Another similar concern is that more training should be conducted with officers who work with Deaf inmates. The Association is also advocating for open captioning in movie theaters and restaurants. Furthermore, they want to ensure that emergency preparedness practices and information are available for the Deaf public across Virginia.

PROGRAM REPORTS

Executive – Eric Raff, Director

Elections for Ms. Engelhardt and Mr. Cline are coming up in November. Dir. Raff is planning Advisory Board meetings for the calendar year of 2026, with meeting days being quarterly on the first Wednesday of February, May, August, and November. This will be put on the agenda for November, and if the Board agrees on those dates, planning can move forward.

Dir. Raff stressed the importance of the report on the Relay transition from analog to digital means that is now required of VDDHH by the financial committees of the Virginia legislature.

The VDDHH building is undergoing renovations, and they are expected to be completed by the end of August. Renovations are focused on updating the breakroom to make it more functional for employees, as well as combining two storage closets into one. One closet for all equipment will be a more efficient use of space.

The agency just renewed the 10-year lease for the building. However, the Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services next door is moving to a different location, so the agency and its resources will not be nearby. However, the Assistive Technology Loan Fund Authority program on the first floor will not be moving.

Several positions are still vacant; VDDHH is struggling to fill the positions for the Policy Analyst, Deaf Mentor Coordinator, and Regional Specialists for Regions 5 and 7. There is exciting news that the Policy Analyst position will soon be filled, though it has not been announced yet. Additionally, VDDHH will propose that the two Regional Specialist positions be combined into one full-time position in hopes of garnering more interest. Unfortunately, another position will have to be added to this list, as the Interpreter Services Coordinator, Danielle Bird, is leaving the agency.

The Support Service Provider (SSP) grant ended on June 30, 2025. A request for funding had been submitted to the board of the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired to try to continue services, but it was denied. Due to lack of ongoing funding, the SSP program had to be discontinued, and the Program Coordinator Adam Drake's position ended on June 30. Despite being denied continued funding, VDDHH is still working hard to find a solution to provide SSP services for the community, including research other grant opportunities.

SKI-HI training for the third cohort of Deaf Mentors concluded back in February, and after months of completing screenings, assessments, and background checks, eleven new Deaf Mentors have been added to the roster. Mr. Stuessy has since been pairing the new mentors with families.

During the last meeting, there was a visitor from the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS). VDDHH is providing training on interpreter services and Deaf culture, as well as an overview of agency services, to staff at DBHDS. The training will be held in September in conjunction with Deaf Awareness month.

Community Services – Paul Stuessy, Manager

Given that Paul Stuessy was out sick, Dir. Raff gave the report for the Community Services Program (CSP), which continues to address information and referral, outreach and training.

Mr. Stuessy has been paying particular attention to the aging population and issues they face. Dir. Raff is learning more about this at the same time, as he recently attended the Deaf Seniors of America conference in early August. The Community Services Program has collaborating with DARS to hold outreach events geared toward the aging population, specifically those of the “Baby Boomer” generation.

Interpreter Services – Karen Brimm, Manager

Ms. Brimm met with the ADA coordinator of DBHDS after the last Advisory Board meeting to discuss interpreter services training and opportunities to work together. Ms. Brimm suggested that DBHDS support funding access to send interpreters to a mental health interpreting training to increase the number of mental health certified interpreters.

Another meeting with the ADA Coordinator of the Supreme Court of Virginia included Dir. Raff. In this meeting, the groups were introduced to each other and discussed desired updates to the MOU between the two organizations for ASL interpreter coordination. She hopes to make meetings with the Supreme Court of Virginia a regular occurrence.

The ISP team submitted a request to DARS IT to create a digital version of the interpreter request form. This task was approved, and work has begun on the form. It is hoped that the form will make Ms. Brimm’s job a little less demanding, but in the meantime, she will be busier, as she needs to work with IT at the same time as handling interpreter coordination tasks.

While office renovations are ongoing, VQAS Coordinator Amy Ashworth has been continuing to proctor assessments offsite at remote testing sites around Virginia. This will likely continue through the first week of September until renovations are complete.

Ms. Brimm provided the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) with the annual projected need for grant funding in preparation for sending the yearly application. VDDHH has been notified that there will be a reduction in the maximum amount requested for the upcoming fiscal year due to changes to the federal Department of Education. The challenge will be figuring out what to cut – possibly retraining or overnight hotel stays. VDDHH has been asked to limit grant requests due to general lack of federal funding for the upcoming fiscal year.

Since Ms. Bird will be leaving, Ms. Brimm is trying to wrap up as many projects as she can. Ms. Bird has proven herself irreplaceable, but the agency will have to try to fill her position as best they can.

The conclusive report on the SSP pilot program has been completed and sent to the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities.

Lastly, Ms. Brimm has continued to fulfill her role as the Virginia Emergency Support Team (VEST) Liaison Officer for accessibility. She has attended several meetings for this role, including a hurricane season training meeting, a seminar on how to respond to mass casualty/fatality events, a VEST training on influenza, and a quarterly VDEM Equity Working Group.

Virginia Relay – Felecia Smith, Manager

Ms. Smith reported on the Virginia Relay, and although usage has decreased, the cost of minutes has doubled. There have been declines in all categories with the exception of IP Captel.

She has been working on a report concerning the transition from analog to digital telecommunication technologies. The report will be sent to HHR by September 15, 2025. VDDHH has been actively creating this report over the last few months and contracted with a consultant to forecast the future needs and possibilities of the Relay program. One of the most crucial gaps that needs to be addressed is the lack of communication technologies provided for the deafblind. Technology in this field is changing incredibly fast – in some places, they are using virtual interpreter avatars that are not human. Remote conference captioning (RCC) has declined in use, but the Relay will continue to market it.

As Ms. Smith was out for a while because of a family emergency, she has attended fewer events than usual. There will be a vacancy with Hamilton for the Outreach Coordinator in the near future.

Regarding the accessibility of the relay for deafblind people, she explained that through a conversation with ITC, the consumers would have to know Braille before they are approved for the software.

Technology Assistance Program -- Brittany Howard, Manager

Outreach contracts are now in place, although there was a two- to three-week gap in services due to a delay in awarding the contracts but TAP resolved the issues and the services are now in place for Regions 1, 2, 4, 6 and 8. Regions 3, 5 and 7 are vacant and Ms. Howard is providing services in those areas. Hopefully, TAP will be able to combine Regions 5 and 7 into a full-time position.

TAP applied for the Broadband Digital Equity Access Development Non-Deployment funds under the Department for Housing and Community Development. Recent communications from that agency indicate that there has been a change in direction and as of right now, everything is on hold.

TAP is working through the transition from analog to digital telecommunications. The program has been planning for office renovations that will merge two storage rooms into one. Ms. Howard was able to hire a temporary employee to help consolidate files, complete the records retention process and recycle outdated and broken equipment.

Ms. Howard demonstrated the digital equipment that is available through TAP. T-Mobile provided training on their T-Mobile IP Relay app. TAP's goal is to set up a contract with vendors to order devices as needed with everything built-in and ready on the tablet, so there is no need for more downloads or account set ups. Square Glow is available. Regarding the Weather Alert, 32 of 60 devices were defective and sent back to the vendor. There is a need for testers to give feedback. She explained units and devices with multi-functions available for

deafblind individuals. The board was directed to the TAP report which included quarterly and yearly totals of the work that was done by the Specialists.

OPEN DISCUSSION AND NEW BUSINESS

Dir. Raff asked the board to review the handout of potential topics to create structure for the next year and discuss them under New Business such as Emergency Management and Law Enforcement training. He will work on setting up speakers for the 2026 board meetings. The board also reviewed the Action Plan on page 2 and the yearly cycles.

Tentative topics and issues to discuss at upcoming meetings include:

- Elections/Voting Accessibility/Sensitivity training (November meeting)
- Strategic Planning (February meeting)
- Budget development (spring)
- Results of Strategic Plan (August)

Speaker topics include:

- Mental health
- Hearing loss related to technology and coping
- Late deaf adults
- Veterans with hearing loss
- City of Roanoke Police
- AI and safeguards
- Training for interpreters to work with deafblind people
- DBVI services to deafblind people

The next meeting will be on November 5 with board elections taking place.

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.