

ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING
QUARTERLY MEETING: September 15, 2023
Hybrid Meeting

Welcome and Introductions:

Members Present: Michelle Paonessa (Chair), Russ Goddard (Vice Chair), Janette Fulton, Melissa Hutzler, Lee Sheffield, Amy Letteri, Debi Shostak, Kallie Mendenhall, Alexander Van Hook, Mark Beall, Tom Foley, Becky Lorah, Joe Hohenstein, Lori Leiman

ODHH Staff: Melissa Hawkins (Director), Dee Dee Keiser, Joe Attaardo, Denise Brown

Interpreters: Cindi Brown, Jessica Bentley – Sassaman

CART: Debbie Cunningham

Moderator: Nichole Wade

Review and Approval of Minutes:

The June 16, 2023 meeting minutes were reviewed. Russ made a motion to pass with a correction of adding Lori's name to the attendance. Joe seconded. Minutes were approved.

Department Reports:

Governor –

The department has been working closely with the Department of Labor and industry on updated regulations pertaining to certification. The Governor's Office is in full support of that regulation update as it proceeds through the regulatory process first as a proposed regulation and then hopefully as a final regulation sometime early next year.

State Representative –

The hearing aid insurance bill that was discussed at the last council hearing has been introduced. There was significant input from different stakeholders, but Joe would love to have direct input coming from anybody on the council, so he gave his email and office phone number.

Aging –

Accessible Pharmacy Services Partnership with the PACE Program

The PACE Program continues to collaborate with Accessible Pharmacy Services (APS), the national leader in medication management for the blind, low-vision, and DeafBlind communities. PACE and APS are finalizing plans for a pilot initiative focusing on PACE enrollment. The Program has identified 200 people within the

enrollment who are blind or visually impaired based on the medications they're taking. This group received a letter asking them to participate in the pilot program, but we haven't received any responses. Outreach calls will be made to these individuals to find out why they haven't responded.

The pilot is being made possible through the collaborative work of several entities, including PACE, Temple University, PA Dept of Health, and APS. Participants will receive free tablet computers through the PA Dept of Health and receive technical assistance and training through Tech Owl, which are students in the Department of Disabilities Studies program at Temple University. APS will then provide medication management and health education at an individual level. Data collected will assist in developing best practices for each group involved in the program.

Referrals to Hearing/Vision Screenings

The PACE Clearinghouse continues to receive calls for those seeking assistance who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing or require vision exams. Since January 2023, the Clearinghouse assisted and referred 123 people to vision services and 30 to hearing services.

Education –

Effective September 5, 2023, all students that are entitled to safeguards under IDEA and Chapter 14 may remain enrolled in school until they turn 22. This includes students who turned 21 during the 22-23 school year and graduated.

Health & Human Services –

Department of Human Services

September is Suicide Awareness Month. To remind everyone the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is available 24/7. Crisis counselors are available by online chat or for TTY users, use your preferred relay service or dial 711 then 988. Also, DHS released the [2022 Annual Child Protective Services Report](#), which provides statewide and county-level data on the efforts to protect and help children who were reported as victims of suspected abuse and neglect.

Office of Developmental Programs (ODP)

Published our third annual [Resource Guide for Supporting Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Individuals](#). This guide offers resources in one central location for those who support or care for someone who is Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or DeafBlind and receives supports from the ODP.

Offering free virtual, RID CEUs, training sessions for interpreters in the fall and several of our upcoming conferences will offer free CEUs for interpreters as well. October 17th will be Ableism in ASL, November 21st will be ASL vocabulary in the IDD world, and December 19th will be English word choices in the IDD world. They

will be from 7 to 8:30pm on Zoom. More information can be found at <https://home.myodp.org/resources/terp-training-series/>

Held 3 listening sessions for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind individuals to give input on a possible interpreter service in the ODP waivers.

Collaborated with the National Association of State Directors of Developmental Disabilities Services to create an affinity group to discuss the intersection of support for people who are deaf and hard of hearing and developmental disabilities systems across the country.

Department of Health

The newborn hearing screening program is funded by a federal grant that is currently in its last active year. The notice of financial opportunity for a new grant, which is to effectively say the grant that has funded this program for years, exists on a 4-year cycle. That new cycle is kicking off and the grant opportunity has been published which means that the Department of Health is deep getting that grant together. Traditionally the newborn hearing screening grant has concentrated on screening, diagnostic intervention and then EI or early intervention services and support as the heart of its mission. It is starting to open to allow us to engage with children up to the age of 3 instead of just screening at birth. The hearing grant is falling under the broad umbrella of the change which is focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion. The other thing of note for folks on this panel that would be interested in newborn hearing screening, the grant is now starting to engage with tracking language acquisition outcomes.

Questions: How are you going about developing a language measure that can track equally across different spoken languages in our population and then ASL? Are you developing something? Are you working with subject matter experts? Once you figure out how to track it and make sure that is reliable, will there be plans written into this grant for what we do with that information in terms of standard development and staffing shortages and things that may play a role in that? Will the project involve some sort of effort to have some sort of collaboration with the family members to provide them resources to teach the family members about ASL and language acquisition as well? Will they also be learning about deaf culture?

Answers: This grant application has been out for 3 weeks. This is a 5-year grant with the expressed purpose of that first year being used to develop those sorts of plans. We're in the very early stages figuring out who we need to get at the table right now. We do know traditionally HERSA has had the FL3 center which is a support center for any programs. They broadened out that so there are now 3 national support centers that focus on technical assistance on family support. We are anticipating that those support centers are going to be very actively involved with each of the states as we develop our plans for tracking language acquisition outcomes. We anticipate leaning heavily on our infant screening advisory council as well as our early hearing detection and advisory council. The earliest steps will be engaging all those partners as well as early intervention and family connections

for family and language. The good news is they are giving us a year to implement this – we are currently in the grant writing phase.

The newborn hearing screening program is a very small slice of a federal grant. Most of the budget goes to a program called family connections for language and learning. Family support and language acquisition has always been a piece of that. We are hoping to expand that scope. A lot of what they do is about getting the parents directly engaged. It supports sign language education but by the terms of our federal grant we are required to be language modality agnostic, which is to say we don't encourage one form of language acquisition at the expense of others.

Labor and Industry –

ODHH

As of today, there are 658 state-registered interpreters and 52 provisional interpreters. These numbers represent the active number of interpreters across PA who are registered with ODHH. (This number does not represent all interpreters as some are not provisional or state registered). ODHH continues to advocate in ongoing legal, education and medical issues that rise due to failure to accommodate requests for interpreters, other accommodations and general questions and concerns.

Summer Academy

ODHH and OVR Collaborated for the DHSSA this past August. With 17 students graduating, our students and staff enjoyed the 10 days at State College and Penn State. We enjoy our Talent Show and both Co-Directors were able to close out the show with a Bang. Graduation and closing ceremonies were attended by The Secretary and Dean of Health and Human Services at PSU. As always, the emotional ceremony showed us the phenomenal work it takes from everyone involved. Lots of tears as always. As always, we would like to remind you this is a 100% fully accessible environment at every single turn. For those of you who need that, it is really life changing. We couldn't do this without an incredible team. It's not every day you see interpreters up on rope courses and strapped up to repel down a wall to ensure that full communication access. As planning is underway for the 2024 Academy, please connect with us if you would like to visit or have any referrals.

SSP Program Updates

Step Up Services continues to provide SSP Coverage to the commonwealth. We are thrilled to see the numbers going up monthly as we have 39 active consumers and 29 active SSP's. We look forward to these numbers growing.

March: 32 Hours
April: 170.5 Hours
May: 202.5 Hours
June: 262 Hours
July: 337.55 Hours

August: 353 Hours

SSP Training

ODHH and our SSP Trainers completed the first SSP Training under the new program. 9 individuals completed an online training and then went onto complete a 1 day in person training. We are looking to lock in our late Fall dates and schedule more SSP's to be trained. Our initial training was held in the Harrisburg area, the next group of trainings will be held in Pittsburgh and Lancaster.

Aging Collaboration

ODHH is working with The Pennsylvania Department of Aging to host a virtual and fully accessible listening session on its 10-year Master Plan for Older Adults. This virtual forum will be held on September 13th from 3-5 pm. As 1 out of every 3 older adults has some degree of hearing loss, they are an extremely important part of these feedback sessions. This forum will be moderated and have captioning and interpreters.

Hearing Loss Expo

October 11th and 12th is coming up quickly and we are excited for the Hearing Loss Expo. We are almost complete with our workshop schedule and look forward to sharing that information with the council. Please note this is free for everyone to attend. We have over 50 vendors registered so far, and they continue to come in daily. If you would like to register, please let us know.

OVR:

The order of selection continues to be open for individuals with the most severely disabilities, those with severe disabilities, and those who do not have severe disabilities. Services are continuing to be provided to eligible customers. The pandemic has significantly affected the number of referrals to OVR, but the number of referrals and spending on customer services have returned to pre-pandemic level spending. Each OVR office continues to implement individual outreach plans to increase their referrals.

Since July 1, 2022, household income requirements have been temporarily lifted from 300% of the federal poverty guidelines for individuals plus a set amount per dependent to \$100,000 plus a small amount per dependent. Certain limitations on financial assistance for post-secondary training has been lifted. Based on the amount of funding expected to be carried over to Federal Fiscal Year 2024, the State Board of Vocational Rehabilitation has approved another temporary extension of the above through June 30, 2024, or earlier, based on the discretion of the OVR Executive Director.

Staffing update - OVR has approximately 120 positions throughout that are in various stages of the human resource process the hiring and recruitment process. All our vacancies are essentially accounted for in one form or another whether that is reviewing the position, posting a vacancy, interviewing candidates, making an offer or on boarding a new person. We recently hired an OVR culture and staff development liaison. Her name is Karen Kirchner. She will work directly with the

OVR leadership team on projects around staff retention and development, labor relations and other key HR and DEIA initial environments.

Fiscal update – OVR remains in very good financial standing overall for the voc rehab program. In terms of our federal fiscal year 2023 grant, we are estimating that we will carry over approximately 100 to \$115 million from our current grant into the next federal fiscal year. We're currently working to ensure we met our state match requirements for the federal fiscal year '23 grant that will be completed by the end of the month. We are starting to see spending return to pre-pandemic levels. Lots of increases over this summer in larger amount of spending due to the college tuition rate increases that were made over the past year.

OVR recently completed a project to close out customer cases who were no longer actively participating to allow staff to focus their energy on customers that were engaged and active with their OVR counselors. Our focus now is on moving existing and future customers through the application eligibility and the employment planning process as quickly as possible.

1st Public Comment Period:

Angela – expressed frustration with the system regarding her son.

Bill – asked whether the revised regulation for Act 57 have been made public and if so, how to find it and what the next steps are with regard to implementation of the amendments to Act 57

Danielle – Same question as Bill on if public comments and regulations for Act 57 are available for review and what is the process.

Megan – expressed concern that Act 57 is a barrier for deaf people to become interpreters and would like to see if amendments can be made to remove that barrier.

Patrick – inquired about how many OVR cases are open in Philadelphia for deaf and hard of hearing individuals and how often cases are open, closed and then reopened again.

Jennifer – inquired about what the proposed provisions to Act 57 are. Expressed need for urgency for changes due to interpreter shortages. Recommended alternative paths for provisional registered interpreters.

Joshua – expressed that Department of Labor should strongly consider new amendments to Act 57, especially for those recently graduated, because things have been impacted with the storage of interpreters.

Old Business:

Survey videos done by CDI should be completed soon. That will be attached to the survey and double check technology issues before being reviewed by committee and sent to the public. The survey will be signed, in online format, captioned, voiced, screen reader, etc. to make it as accessible as possible.

New Business:

Code of conduct will be available for participants that want to make a public comment. Participants would need to check a button that they are agreeing to the code of conduct when they register for the meeting. Draft given to council members to review. Comments from council members consisted of the need to set consequences if terms violated. Consequences would be moderator could mute or remove the participant. The meeting in person or virtually should be a safe space for everyone. Draft will be sent to legal for their review. Russ made a motion to send to legal. Rebecca seconded and council voted unanimously in favor.

Discussion about interpreter shortage was conducted by council members. Discussion concluded by Melissa saying ODHH recognizes Act 57's restrictions and limitations but it is a customer protection law. ODHH has made note of all the comments and assures the public and council they will continue to keep working on the interpreter shortage. Brainstorming ideas such as pipeline programs were mentioned with Michelle tabling the discussion but recommending council members come up with ideas between this meeting and next.

Poll for meeting dates for 2024 will be sent out via email. A change in location was also proposed.

2nd Public Comment Period:

Danielle – discussed how the shortage of interpreters is alarming. Wanted to know if amendments to Act 57 are publicly available for stakeholders.

Tara – shared personal insights on the interpreter shortage.

Megan – expressed that there should be different levels for interpreters so older certified can support the new interpreters. ODHH needs a program to support the interpreters even with business practices. Businesses and organizations need to know what services are available here in PA. Massachusetts and California have good programs that PA could look at.

Neil – Expressed that a compromise document that resolved the most problematic aspects of the law was made in 2017/2018 and encourages the council and stakeholders to stand true to the crafted and compromised document rather than advancing their own version.

Barbara – Expressed that Act 57 is broken and needs fixed. There are a lot of interpreters that are qualified but unable to pass the test. Sometimes the wrong interpreter is selected for a specific appointment. There are a lot of solutions we need, and we need more support for the interpreter.

Patrick – asked for the information Mike Kirby gave.

Harry – Discussed revisiting Act 57 with all leaders coming together for solutions. Spoke about interpreters at hospitals especially needed.

Joshua – Mentioned funding or partnership opportunities between ODHH and PDE to invest in sign language classes at the high school level. Also encourages the office

to consider investing in interpreting at the college level so people can get to that 4-year degree to sit for the performance test. Another consideration is state funding to provide deaf mentors to the newly graduated interpreters as they pursue certification.

Other:

Many council members made a motion to close the meeting and motion was seconded by all.

Meeting was adjourned.

Next Council Meeting is on December 1, 2023.

Pennsylvania's Advisory Council for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing (ACDHH) was established because of Act 1997-37, which required the establishment of the Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and the Advisory Council. The Council is mandated to provide recommendations to public and private agencies, advocate for services and act as a bureau of information.