

Report on the Response of the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
To The Impact of the Aging of Virginia's Population

Submitted November 14, 2014

Pursuant to Code of Virginia §§ 2.2-5510 and 51.5-136, the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing submits this report of its progress in addressing the impact of the aging of Virginia's population.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ronald Lanier". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Ronald L. Lanier, Director
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Executive Summary

The Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH) serves Virginians of all ages. Older Virginians are primary users of the VDDHH Technology Assistance Program (TAP), receiving assistance in accessing telecommunications devices which aid in independence.

Major issues in the coming years will include:

- Assisting agencies of the Commonwealth in understanding the communication access needs of older Virginians who are deaf or hard of hearing and assisting them in meeting those needs.
- Remaining attuned to the developments of new technologies to incorporate into the TAP program to meet the needs and expectations of a tech-savvy population.
- Identifying funding sources for the purchase of hearing aids and other assistive technologies.
- Preparing for the retirement of a significant percentage of the agency's workforce.

Agency Description:

The programs and services of the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH), authorized in Chapter 13 of Title 51.5 of the Code of Virginia, ensure that the agency's focus remains on communications access for persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind. VDDHH works with consumers, state and local agencies, and the private sector to achieve consistent and effective communication through training, technology, telecommunications access and through the provision of qualified sign language interpreters.

VDDHH fulfills its mission and meets the needs of consumers and state agencies through the provision of the following programs and services:

Interpreter Programs, including the Interpreter Service Program (ISP), coordinating sign language interpreters and real-time captioning (CART) for state agencies and Virginia courts; The Directory of Qualified Interpreters, providing direct access to qualified interpreters across the state; and, The Virginia Quality Assurance Screening (VQAS) and the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA), offering diagnostic skills assessments to sign language interpreters for community and classroom assignments. VDDHH contracts with qualified sign language interpreters and VQAS raters in order to operate these programs.

The Technology Assistance Program (TAP), providing telecommunications-related equipment to qualified applicants who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind or speech disabled.

Outreach Services, available statewide through staff and contracted providers offering training, information and referral, technical assistance and individual problem resolution as well as direct access to the Technology Assistance Program (TAP). In addition, Outreach provides awareness activities across the Commonwealth to promote understanding and awareness of Virginia Relay and emergency preparedness.

Virginia Relay oversight, ensuring effective and efficient operation of Telecommunications Relay Services in the Commonwealth. Virginia Relay is a federally-mandated telecommunications relay service for persons who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, or speech disabled. It allows these individuals to use specialized telecommunication devices or features to communicate with standard telephone users.

1. If your agency has undertaken any actions to respond to the current and future impact of an aging population, such as needs assessments, strategic planning, or use of best practices, please briefly describe those actions. Please indicate what assistance from DARS could help your agency as it prepares to serve an aging Virginia population.

VDDHH recognizes that hearing loss has a significant impact on an aging population and incorporates that recognition into all of our strategic planning activities. In addition, the agency is aware of the unique needs of Deaf Virginians as a distinct subset of the aging population in Virginia. DARS could assist VDDHH by consulting with us for guidance on including communications access for persons with hearing loss in all activities offered by DARS and targeted for this population.

2. Briefly describe your agency's services that are used primarily by older Virginians and the funding streams (types and amounts) that support those services. If these particular services or funding streams are provided in conjunction with other state or local agencies or other for profit or non-profit organizations, please list them.

With one exception, VDDHH does not track the age of participants in our programs and services. Our services are available to individuals of all ages. The one program that does have a primary user base of older Virginians is the Technology Assistance Program (TAP). TAP is an equipment distribution program that provides assistive devices, primarily for telecommunications purposes, to qualified applicants who are deaf, hard of hearing, or speech-impaired either at no or a discounted cost. Eligibility is based on verification of disability, income, and residency. There are no age restrictions. After pre-screening, qualified applicants are loaned equipment for a period of 30 days to evaluate its ability to restore communications access; if successful, the equipment is assigned to the applicant. Devices available include text telephones (TTYs), large print TTYs, telephone amplifiers, Voice Carry Over and Captioned Phones, Hearing Carry Over phones, and visual, tactile, and audible signalers. In addition, special order equipment is available on a case-by-case basis. This program receives funding in the state budget from the Communications Sales Tax & Use Fund. For FY15, the program is budgeted for \$434,064.

3. Identify current agency programs specifically designed to serve older Virginians that fall into any of the following eight categories:

- **Health Care/Wellness**
- **Education**
- **Public Safety (including Adult Abuse Prevention)**
- **Recreation**
- **Housing**
- **Accessibility (including Livable Communities <http://www.vadrs.org/vblc/>)**
- **Financial Security**
- **Transportation**

VDDHH does not have any current programs *specifically designed* to serve older Virginians. All of the agency’s programs serve cradle to grave.

4. Is your agency able to meet all of the service demands of older Virginians for the services listed above? If there are any instances where the demand for services exceeds your agency’s ability to meet the demand, please indicate the service and the extent of the unmet demand. Also, if your agency maintains waiting lists for services, please provide this information, including the waiting list numbers for each service.

Since transitioning to a loan-to-own (L20) model several years ago and with stable funding from the Communications Sales Tax & Use Fund, TAP has not experienced waiting lists. The primary limitation in meeting the needs is the availability of Outreach contractors and staff to meet with interested consumers to review program options and assist with equipment selection. Each Outreach provider covers a large geographic area and as the population ages and more people seek assistance with telecommunications access, this could result in delays in service.

5. Provide the number of persons, by gender if available, who received services from the agency in each of the past five state fiscal years (FY 2010 through FY2014) who fell into the following age ranges: 60-64; 65-74; 75-84; and 85 and older. If your agency lacks specific information about the numbers of older Virginians it serves but has other evidence indicating that it is serving more or fewer older Virginians than it has in the past, please describe the basis for that estimation.

Other than TAP, VDDHH does not track program participation by age. The table below shows the participation, by age, of the age ranges noted.

Participants in TAP by Age Range FY10 through FY14						
Age Group	Fiscal Year	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
60 - 64		38	58	52	43	38
65 - 74		112	150	118	123	110
75 - 84		151	238	167	157	182
85 & older		209	186	217	203	204
	Total	510	632	554	526	534
	% of all TAP	63%	61%	74%	59%	68%
Totals do not include applicants who received “pay coupons” and TAP/L2O self-purchase devices.						

6. Referring to the services or funding you described in item two, describe any services or funding provided to older Virginians for which the accessibility or availability varies considerably in different parts of the Commonwealth.

TAP relies upon Outreach providers (contractors and staff) across the Commonwealth to provide access to the program. Accessibility and availability of the services of this program are basically consistent across the state, with no considerable variations at this time.

7. Over the next five to 10 years, in what ways do you anticipate that an aging population will impact your agency's services, funding streams, or policies? Consider the impact from an increase in the number of older Virginians and whether the needs of older Virginians will differ from those of today's older adults. Please include any anticipated impacts upon the cost of services, changes in type of services or the manner of service delivery, or modifications to agency policies, staffing needs, or procedures.

VDDHH is aware of the constantly evolving world of assistive technology and works to ensure that devices offered through TAP meet the needs of program participants. As the population ages, the consumers seeking our services will be significantly more "tech savvy" and it will be incumbent upon us to respond appropriately.

8. Please describe the primary steps that should be taken at the federal, state, or local levels to meet the future demands of older Virginians and to make services delivery more effective and efficient.

One area of concern which is not directly addressed within the programs and services of VDDHH is the cost of and access to hearing aids. As technology has improved, the cost of hearing aids has risen, with a pair hearing aids costing, on average, between \$1500 and \$3000. Few insurance plans cover the cost of hearing aids. At this time, VDDHH maintains a "hearing aid packet" to provide information on sources of funding for these devices. While a mandated benefit may not be palatable, such a benefit or alternative funding may need to be considered as more older Virginians will require hearing aids to maintain independence.

A second concern is access to services in federal, state and local programs for older Virginians who are native sign language users who may need sign language interpreters or late-deafened individuals who require real-time captioning (CART) services to access information and services. Every agency of the Commonwealth must be prepared to meet the communication needs of these population groups.

9. Identify the extent to which your agency provides "customer-oriented" publications and websites that are designed to be "senior-friendly." If the information you currently provide is not readily accessible to older Virginians, please identify any steps your agency is taking to improve their access to this information.

The VDDHH website is currently in transition with attention towards a broad range of accessibility. The agency maintains applications and program materials on the web and in hard copy format upon request.

10. Describe any other services or programs that your agency plans to implement in the future to address the impact of the aging of Virginia's population.

VDDHH will continue to reach out and respond to older Virginians with our current programs and services.

11. Please indicate if your agency is experiencing an increase in employees retiring later and describe any actions your agency is taking or plans to take to accommodate its aging workforce with innovative practices.

VDDHH has a small workforce of 9 salaried employees, several of whom have been with the agency for more than 20 years. Four employees are currently eligible for full retirement and others are approaching eligibility. The agency provides flexible scheduling and telecommuting options to accommodate the needs of these employees. The agency also has two part-time employees who are retirees. Succession planning is a significant issue which must be addressed in order to ensure that, as these staff members move to retirement, the programs and services of the agency remain viable.