

**Testimony before Senate Government Operations
February 19, 2014**

S. 66, An act pertaining to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify with my colleagues from the Health Department and Agency of Education about this important issue. The closure of the Center and the Austine School reinforced the importance of collaboration between AHS and AOE to ensure the provision of services to both kids and adults who are deaf and hard of hearing.

Much positive work is going on.

Our Division of Vocational Rehabilitation serves deaf, hard of hearing and late deafened adults.

There are four VR Regional Counselors for the Deaf located in Burlington, Barre, Rutland and Springfield.

A wide range of services for Vermonters who are deaf, hard of hearing, or late-deafened are available from the Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (RCD):

- Experienced sign language users with extensive knowledge of Deaf culture
- Knowledge of types of hearing loss as it impacts employment and independence
- Work with high school students and adults
- Work with Audiologist statewide in conjunction with hearing aids
- Are a resource for individuals and employers.

In addition to employment services, RCDs provide:

- Technical assistance in different settings, i.e., accommodations at work and home using adaptive equipment,
- Technical assistance around the Americans with Disabilities Act,
- Information about deaf clubs or hard of hearing groups,
- Information about support groups
- Accommodation tips for employers
- Employment services for the Deaf, hard of hearing, and late deafened may include:
 - Employment Counseling and Guidance
 - Career development
 - Finding your job interests and skills
 - Resume writing
 - Interview skills
 - Keeping your job

- School and job training
- Worksite accommodations

Life after high school transition services include:

- Information on accommodations
- Job leads, referrals, and job try-outs
- Wide-range consultation
- Special equipment for work

Recent **changes in the Rehabilitation Act** will expand VR services to deaf and hard of hearing students in school. The Regional Counselors for the Deaf will partner with the VR Transition Counselors to serve students at a younger age across Vermont's high schools.

For the three past **SFYs (2012-2014)**, the VR Regional Counselors for the Deaf have initiated 529 cases with applicants from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, and 107 additional cases were opened in non-RCD caseloads for individuals with a hearing disability for a total of **646 applicants** during the time period.

VR also maintains a **Registry of Certified ASL Interpreters** for the use of our staff and other public and private entities.

In addition, we partner with **The Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL)** to provide services for deaf, hard of hearing and late deafened adults:

Deaf Independence Program

VCIL employs one peer advocate counselor who has a focus on issues important to those who are Deaf. Our peer counselor works with approximately 30 to 40 individuals annually. The individuals create independent living plans, and the PAC helps guide and support people as they work towards independence. In FY 2014, VCIL worked with 16 individuals who are Deaf and 21 individuals who are Hard of Hearing.

Individuals set independent living plans and identify goals that include seeking employment, socialization, getting a driver license, advocacy for communication access and continuing to farm. Many peers are looking to access telephone equipment/other communication devices, hearing aids and other equipment, for example, flashers and ear molds.

Other individual goals also become systems advocacy goals of the program. VCIL saw an increase in people who are Deaf not getting *access to mental health counseling services* because the counselors were not willing to hire an ASL interpreter. Other communication access issues included *access to ASL interpreters at doctor and hospital visits*. VCIL works with these business owners, helping them understand their responsibilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

VCIL heard from individuals in *need of hearing aids* who were denied health care coverage, and VCIL has been working to change that.

In addition, our staff provides *Deaf culture workshops* in partnership with disability awareness trainings, as requested.

Finally, here is status of the programs formerly operated by the VT Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing:

1. The Vermont Interpreter Referral Service (VIRS) has moved to VCIL. VCIL is currently working with an advisory committee to ensure that VIRS is sustainable.
2. Nine East Network has assumed responsibility as the overhead agency for two programs:
 - a. Regional Educational Consult Program (consists of about 12 regional consultants who work with schools to provide support to deaf/hard of hearing students).
 - b. Family and Infant Program (helps families who have deaf/hard of hearing babies learn communication strategies)
3. Austine Museum-The collection of Austine School historical artifacts will hopefully be preserved. This will be determined by the trustee who will be overseeing the liquidation process.
4. Equipment Distribution Program (distributes free communication equipment to eligible folks) hasn't been re-established yet. Autumn Barnet from the VT Dept of Public Service is trying to find a way to re-establish EDP. The Assistive Technology Project within VR has expressed interest in overseeing the program to the Dept. of Public Service.
5. The Austine Audiological Center was renamed The Brattleboro Hearing Center and is operative as an independent business.
6. ACCESS (supported employment and case management program)-HCRS in Brattleboro is working with Patrick Harris to cover services.
7. School Accommodation Program- This will be absorbed into local school budgets