

**Department of Rehabilitation Services
Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services
67 Prospect Avenue, 3rd Floor
Hartford, CT 06106-2980
Advisory Committee Meeting: April 7, 2014
Minutes**

Members in Attendance:

Raymond DeRosa, Parent of student enrolled in public school
Amy Mirizzi, Designee, Department of Public Health
Mary Lynch, Hard of Hearing Member, Office of State Comptroller
Matt Ranelli, Parent of student in oral education program
William Rivera, Designee, Department of Children & Families
Mary Silvestri, Deaf Member
Luisa Soboleski, Board Chairperson
Jane Whitehead, Designee, Department of Developmental Services
Bernice Zampano, Designee, Department of Labor

Members Not Present:

Jeffrey Bravin, Deaf Member
Astread Ferron-Poole, Designee, Department of Social Services
Colleen Hayles, Designee, Department of Education
Terri-Lynn Johnston, Designee, Department of Social Services
John Lamb, Designee, Department of Public Health
Sandra McGee, President of CCOSD, Ex-Officio Member
Edward Peltier, Executive Director, American School for the Deaf, Ex-Officio Member

Vacant Positions:

Deaf / Hard of Hearing member
Designee, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services
Education consultant, Ex-Officio
Otolaryngologist licensed to practice in the State of Connecticut
Parent of a deaf child
Parent of a student enrolled at ASD

DORS Staff Present:

Maryann Dayton-Fitzgerald, Counselor
Melissa Dennis, Counselor
Sara Gerhold, Interpreter Coordinator
Dwight Godwin, Interpreter Coordinator

Interpreters: Marysue Owens and Cyndi Ward

CART Provider: Sharon Masse

Call to Order, Acceptance of Agenda, Minutes and Adjournment Time:

Soboleski called meeting to order at 1:40pm. Acceptance of the agenda. There was discussion about Ed Peltier's retirement from American School for the Deaf (ASD) and giving recognition to him during the upcoming June 9 meeting. Silvestri moved to accept the minutes of the last meeting, DeRosa seconded, passed.

DORS Report:

Gerhold gave a report on behalf of Commissioner Porter. No major changes in personnel. Commissioner Porter will e-mail information about the DORS structure by the end of the month. A public hearing was held on a bill regarding interpreting standards. The hearing was very well attended, and based on the feedback, the language of the bill changed. It still has to go through the formal process, but the draft that was voted out of committee really focuses on two things: (1) develop a plan with the Commissioner of Education to ensure that an adequate number of qualified interpreters are available to assist students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and (2) submit a report recommending (a) any new standards necessary to ensure that an adequate number of qualified interpreters are available to assist state residents, (b) a timeline to implement such new standards, (c) a fee structure if advisable, for interpreters to register with DORS, and (d) methods to monitor compliance with interpreter qualification standards. Copies of the substitute interpreter bill language were distributed to members.

There was a prep rally held in March at ASD, geared towards students who are deaf and hard of hearing. There were keynote speakers from Sorenson, The Learning Center, and some training sessions offered by staff from the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS). From all reports, it sounded like a great event and a good exposure for the students to what BRS services can offer. Counselors from the Counseling Unit continue to provide support to both students and staff at ASD.

Counseling Report:

Dennis explained that the Counseling Unit supports ASD in a different capacity than BRS. For example, last week, she had a conversation with Human Resources at ASD to assist because there is a struggle with vendors from their employment assistance program (EAP) in providing interpreting services for deaf employees seeking counseling. Counselors sometimes are involved with PPT meetings. Counselors also provide services for parents and families to figure out what some of the concerns are, pinpoint issues and then work with ASD on "connecting all dots".

Dennis shared a report that demonstrated numbers over a two-month period. Counselors attended 33 different meetings, provided 121 counseling sessions and 68 additional case management services were completed. Forty inquiries were received, of which the most popular topic is related to hearing aid funding.

Dennis spoke of a bill that was recently proposed in the legislature increasing the age for all individuals with hearing loss to get hearing aid funding. Unfortunately, she did not see the bill until the last minute as it was buried under “real estate insurance”.

Dayton-Fitzgerald added that she and Melissa work with a wide variety of people starting at birth to three, all the way up to senior citizen age, and with children of deaf adults and the hard of hearing population. They are in the schools sometimes trying to support children who have deaf parents who sometimes fall through the cracks because the school isn’t contacting the parents. They try to promote the understanding that there’s different ways to contact deaf parents when their children are in school and having some challenges -- educating schools, almost one person at a time, about how to contact the parents, videophones, texting and ways to connect overall. In the numbers presented, there are some instances of repeated contacts and examples of the types of meetings that counselors attend.

There is currently collaboration taking place with the Department of Social Services (DSS) to have a fall conference and to help make their system more user-friendly for deaf and hard of hearing individuals to access.

Interpreting Unit Report:

Godwin explained that not a lot has changed since the last advisory committee meeting. Numbers are continuing along the same lines as far as staffing within the Interpreting Unit. The one remaining PTP interpreter, who’s also a legal interpreter, will be retiring as of May 1. With one less legal interpreter, the Unit is working hard to try to get more interpreters qualified to provide interpreting services in legal court and in police matters. Education numbers remain very much the same; the Unit had only recently started serving K-12 students on a full-time basis at the beginning of the school year with four school districts, and is now down to two. The assumption is that two of the schools found alternative interpreters and ceased their requests, which is fine, given the students are receiving appropriate services. Currently, there’s 256 registered interpreters total and 125 reside in Connecticut. There is a large increase in the number of interpreters who are providing video remote interpreting (VRI) in the hospitals, and they’re registering in order to be compliant with state statute. Godwin briefly commented

on the charts from handout which included interpreting service statistics by region, by request method, by assigned hours, by types of customers, by lead time to fill assignment.

Soboleski asked whether it was confirmed that the two school systems that are no longer using DORS interpreting services are providing their own interpreters, and how it would be possible to know whether or not those schools have continued services using certified and qualified interpreters. Godwin said we did not know for sure; that the schools had contacted DORS and requested that the assignments be cancelled with no further details. Soboleski expressed concern about schools trying to find ways to save money and how it may not always result in providing the least restrictive environment for students. Godwin commented that the way the statutes read, the Interpreting Unit doesn't really have authority to police and monitor and ask those questions; this is something that needs to be proposed in new legislation with "teeth". Soboleski commented that it is a concern because schools will seek ways to utilize person(s) who may not necessarily be qualified to interpret and asked how the proposed interpreter bill would affect this. Godwin commented the intent of the proposed bill is to strengthen the statutes and means for monitoring interpreters and while the end result is still unknown, the legislators have specifically named the Commissioner of Education to work with Commissioner Porter to ensure that there are qualified interpreters providing services in school systems. Gerhold added that the original bill contained very specific language about the expectations for interpreters working in various settings (i.e., medical, legal, educational). The substitute bill is assigning a task to Commissioner Porter (and those others she designates) to work more closely with the language within the bill and to come up with solutions as to how to best accomplish the overall goal of raising interpreter standards. The bill indicates that someone from the Office of Protection and Advocacy (OPA), someone from the task force from the Connecticut Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (CRID), as well as some interpreters will be involved. Silvestri suggested that perhaps this would result in more training options or classes for interpreters. Soboleski added that a Bachelors' degree is now a requirement to undertake RID interpreting certification exams and that CRID as an organization is also looking at training opportunities. CRID will be hosting a community forum on April 26.

Whitehead and Silvestri expressed disappointment that advisory members were not made aware of the mentioned bills prior to the February legislative session. Soboleski concurred and explained that a former employee who retired, Diane Wixted, used to serve as "agency watchdog" and would keep the advisory members abreast of anything that was happening at the legislature. Silvestri asked how the interpreter bill originated and Gerhold explained that it was presented by an independent task force, comprised of various individuals from the deaf community and interpreter organizations who met with

OPA and then proposed the bill; it was not presented by DORS. Discussion took place on how the bill should have been shared with advisory members prior so that everyone could have been involved in contacting senators, congress representatives and lobbyists. Rivera inquired whether or not Commissioner Porter was aware of and/or supported the bill and who may have been in attendance at the public hearing. Gerhold provided confirmation that Commissioner Porter had been there and testified, fully aware of the proposed legislation. Godwin added that his understanding was the testimony had a “common thread” in that the impact of the legislation would be significant and as a result, the committee that held the hearing then proposed the substitute bill to further investigate the implications, and that Commissioner Porter expressed concerns with some of the language within but supported the overall concept. Ranelli asked, going forward, for the agency legislative liaison (Andrew Norton) to share relevant legislative reports with advisory members to keep them informed, and to provide an opportunity for members to give feedback. Soboleski will follow up regarding this with Commissioner Porter.

General Discussion:

Ranelli expressed concern that schools in state are now implementing Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) testing, and there is an audio component to the instructions in the language section but there is neither video nor live reader provided for hearing impaired students. Recently, there was a sign language insert added, but it is rumored to be inadequate, and does not even provide captioning. Ranelli stated that video was necessary since many of students rely on lip-reading. His concern with increased use of audio testing components is that if students are evaluated on these tests and they have longitudinal studies that follow their test results over the course of their academic career, this presents real implications and to not provide these needed services is to put them at another disadvantage relative to their hearing peers. Soboleski commented that this same discussion was taking place within the Coalition group and that both Colleen Hayles and Cristi Alberino from the Department of Education were very aware of the issues. Ranelli emphasized again the importance of field testing for all students to get familiar with testing by having access to it – and how equally important it was for deaf and hard of hearing students to have the same/equivalent access. He stressed also that if scores are going to be used internally to measure performance, that that “sector” of the school population needs to be measured accurately. In the past, with the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT), classroom teachers could administer it “live”, modifying language to include oral, signed English, or ASL depending on the student’s need – but now it is all done via technology and SBAC wants to ensure standardization.

Silvestri asked to continue discussion about the group's mission and how the topics discussed thus far during the meeting aligned with the group's goals. There was consensus that the group is here for the deaf and hard of hearing community in state and wants to ensure they receive appropriate services. Mention was made regarding the decreased number of staff existing compared to many years ago when the agency had community educator, trainer, legislative watchdog and others. There are currently seven full-time office staff, of which two are counselors who cover the entire state. Office staff are attempting to do the best they can to tackle issues under the circumstances. As discussed at the last advisory meeting, there is a preliminary organizational structure in place and BESB remains large due to federal financial support. Rivera again expressed frustration with the advisory members not having increased contact with the agency's legislative liaison and being left in the "dark". Whitehead expressed a desire for "purpose", for the group to be able to say at the conclusion of a year that something was accomplished and to move forward, for increased accountability rather than feeling as an ineffectual group that keeps rehashing the same issues over and over again.

DeRosa commented that he had been an advisory group member for close to twenty years and a large portion of previous meetings had been dedicated to legislative issues. Back then, deadlines were understood and clearly communicated and the group had the opportunity to get behind certain bills and modify language, and it was the responsibility of the Commissioner to keep the group informed. At the very least, DeRosa would like an agenda item on every meeting that deals with legislative issues (seconded by Whitehead). Members commented on how helpful it would be to have the legislative liaison for the agency meet with the group at the request of the Chair and Commissioner to help understand what the process is like in the agency and how the group can provide feedback to him/her on what we should be doing or thinking about for next year.

Gerhold commented that prior to the merger with DORS, CDHI had the same seven people on staff. The downsizing and cuts spoken of were not a result of the merger. The identity of the Commission, however, did get lost, and people continue to get confused, thinking that the Commission has disappeared and services were cut, when really the same services that CDHI had prior to the merger still exist in the form of the Interpreting Unit and Counseling Unit. In an effort to move forward, it was suggested that the advisory group identify what the gaps are, what services are missing, and make such recommendations to the Commissioner. If advisory members are confident in what is happening with the existing two Units, then perhaps overall energies need to be directed towards legislative issues, training opportunities, seeking advocates, rebuilding a resource "blue book," or any other services that advisory members feel the deaf and hard of hearing people in the state truly need. Silvestri added that

she would like to have regular updates at future meetings from Jon Slifka, the new governor's liaison to the disability community, and from Andrew Norton, legislative liaison.

Announcements:

John Maucere, deaf comedian and actor from Los Angeles, will be performing at ASD tonight at 7:00 p.m. in the Ward gym.

Next meeting, Soboleski will invite Ed Peltier, so the group can give recognition for his involvement with the advisory group.

Adjournment: Meeting adjourned at 3:00 p.m.

Next Meeting: June 9, 2014