

Georgia Commission for the Deaf or Hard of Hearing Quarterly Meeting
Thursday, January 15, 2026
12:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.

Members Present:, Dr. Amy Lederberg, Ms. Anne McQuade, Mr. Russell Fleming, Dr. Paula Harmon, Ms. Deanna Swope, & Dr. Melanie Morris

Members Absent: Dr. Stacey Tucci, Mr. Ibrahim Dabo, Dr. Chelsea Tehan, Ms. Stormey Cone, Mr. Byron Smith, Mr. Bob Smith, & Dr. Alison Morrison

Guests: Mr. Mark Rosica, Dr. Meg Gibson, Ms. Kelly Jenkins, Dr. Alexa Todd, Dr. Jessica Bergeron, Ms. Amy Cohen Efron

Interpreters: Ms. Tanesh & Ms. Sylvia Primeaux

Captioning: The SOS Agency

1. Old Business / Announcements

a. Approval of Minutes

Commissioner Amy Lederberg called the meeting to order at 12:08 pm. The October meeting minutes were approved unanimously.

Georgia Association for the Deaf

The group began by welcoming Ms. Amy Cohen Efron, who recently assumed the role of President of the Georgia Association of the Deaf (GAD). She provided an overview of GAD as a statewide advocacy organization focused on systems-level change rather than individual case management. Ms. Cohen Efron outlined key challenges facing Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, including language deprivation and limited access to essential information related to medical care, licensing, immigration, and public services.

She expressed appreciation for the Commission’s prior support of the language and literacy bill and conveyed interest in expanded collaboration, particularly around reporting and accountability. Concerns were also raised regarding inconsistent application of the Homestead exemption for individuals with disabilities across Georgia counties and the resulting impact on constituents.

The group also discussed advancing a contracted “how-to” accessibility guide being developed by Mr. Aaron Shoemaker, with an emphasis on encouraging broader adoption of accessible practices across government and agency websites. Commissioner Russell Fleming, who leads the related working group, will support further development of this initiative. It was clarified that while each commission initiative must be led by a commissioner, working groups include both commissioners and non-commissioners, and volunteer contributions are welcomed and valued.

Ms. Cohen Efron further distinguished between lobbying and advocacy, noting that while nonprofit organizations face restrictions on lobbying, the commission is permitted to engage in

such efforts. The conversation then turned to emergency preparedness and accessibility, with Ms. Cohen Efron observing that prior progress in state government accessibility has slowed due to staff turnover during the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring renewed education and outreach.

Concerns were expressed that current efforts may be more reactive than comprehensive, limiting the ability to fully assess statewide accessibility. Commissioner Fleming noted a planned visit to the State Capitol on February 23 as an opportunity to reconnect with stakeholders. Finally, Ms. Cohen Efron inquired about the availability of reliable statewide data identifying deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals by ZIP code, emphasizing that the absence of comprehensive population data hinders advocacy and planning, particularly for underserved populations. Commissioner Amy Lederberg acknowledged uncertainty regarding such data and indicated the topic could be revisited later due to time constraints.

2. GaCHDD Initiatives

a. Access to Language and Audiology Services (AtLAS)

The AtLAS initiative continues to advance efforts to improve access to language and audiology services through four dedicated working groups.

[Let Georgia Hear](#), led by Dr. Alexa Todd. The Let Georgia Hear project is designed to serve as a centralized, one-stop resource to assist individuals and families in accessing audiology services, with planned future expansion to include interpretive services and assistive devices. The initiative is supported by a maintained grant through the Auditory Verbal Center and a recently awarded \$20,000 grant from the McGowan Fund to enhance website development, optimize design, and improve usability. A beta version of the website, letgeorgiahear.org, was introduced at the symposium, with a full launch anticipated later this month. A usability tester who is also a parent of a child with hearing loss has been engaged to verify approximately 50 listed resources, confirm the accuracy of contact information and forms, and incorporate practical guidance for families.

Commissioner Amy Lederberg confirmed that the Commission unanimously approved, via email vote, the use of its logo on the Let Georgia Hear website and related materials. Ms. Jenkins shared website screenshots and invited members to submit feedback or corrections to Dr. Todd. Additional partner logos will be added as they become available. She also highlighted the Let Georgia Hear Facebook group, which includes approximately 600 members, and outlined plans for targeted outreach and social media engagement to encourage users to transition to the website. Originally launched 14 years ago as an advocacy effort focused on insurance coverage for hearing aids, the initiative has since expanded to address broader access needs. Current outreach efforts include distributing promotional materials featuring QR codes at conferences and professional events, with further promotion planned at upcoming audiology conferences.

The discussion further addressed coordination with pediatric outreach materials, branding considerations, and the strategic use of QR codes and URLs to ensure families and medical providers are directed to accurate and up-to-date resources. Members agreed to continue reviewing and refining links, branding, and materials to maintain accuracy, consistency, and visibility of Commission involvement. Mr. Mark Rosica emphasized the importance of monitoring website usage metrics and requested an annual usage report, which Ms. Jenkins

agreed to provide once sufficient data is available. Ms. Jenkins concluded by expressing appreciation to Mr. McGowan for his grant-writing support, Ms. Debbie Brilling for serving as fiduciary, and the core team members who meet biweekly to guide the project's ongoing development.

Audiology Doctorate (Au.D.)

Commissioner Paula Harmon, Project Lead of AtLAS, presented the two proposed goals advanced by the AUD Audiology Working Group. These goals were:

1. To advocate to Georgia lawmakers to amend [HB659](#) and add licensed audiologists to code (O.C.G.A. § 31-34-4) to defray the cost of obtaining an AuD through a student loan repayment plan.
2. To explore the feasibility of adding audiology to the [Georgia Regional Contract Program](#) to allow for tuition reciprocity from neighboring-state AuD degree programs.

In the absence of a quorum, it was agreed that formal votes taken during the meeting would be supplemented by email votes from absent commissioners to ensure full participation. Commissioner Harmon moved to pursue the first goal, advocating for an amendment to House Bill 659 to include licensed audiologists in the state's existing loan repayment program for healthcare professionals serving underserved areas. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Anne McQuade and approved by the commissioners present, with final confirmation pending via email vote. Commissioner Harmon then moved to advance the second goal, which involves exploring the feasibility of adding audiology to Georgia's regional contract program to allow Georgia students to receive tuition reciprocity at out-of-state audiology programs. This motion was also seconded by Commissioner McQuade and passed unanimously among those in attendance.

1. Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce

Following the votes, Commissioner Amy Lederberg provided an update on a recent meeting with the Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce. The Board has engaged a consulting firm to conduct a workforce survey of audiology and speech pathology programs and residencies across Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Florida. The purpose of the survey is to track the practice locations of graduates from the past five years to better assess workforce distribution. Commissioner Lederberg expressed concern regarding the study's limited geographic scope, noting the exclusion of nearby states such as Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee, whose graduates frequently practice in Georgia. She also questioned the inclusion of speech pathology data, as it does not directly align with the commission's hearing workforce priorities. Commissioner Lederberg reiterated that the commission's primary focus remains strengthening the audiology and hearing workforce.

Commissioner Melanie Morris offered to support the ongoing audiology workforce study by leveraging her professional contacts in Tennessee, noting that a significant number of audiologists practicing in Georgia receive their training in neighboring states not currently

included in the survey. She expressed her willingness to help connect the Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce with relevant academic programs, even if those institutions fall outside the study's initial geographic scope. Commissioner Amy Lederberg welcomed this assistance and clarified that while the Board is responsible for conducting the study and producing the final report, the commission intends to aid outreach efforts by contacting practicing audiologists to identify their training programs and facilitate follow-up with those institutions. She reiterated concerns about the study's limited scope and advocated for expanding it to include additional southeastern states, such as Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. She also noted that if participation from ENT residency programs proves limited, the commission may seek support from Commissioner Harmon and her professional network.

Ms. Jenkins recommended sharing the Georgia Tech data dashboard with the Board, emphasizing data demonstrating a strong correlation between achieving the three-month diagnostic benchmark and the presence of an audiology training program. Ms. Gibson agreed this information would be beneficial and supported providing the data to inform the study. Commissioner Lederberg further clarified the Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce does not engage in lobbying and instead focuses exclusively on data collection and reporting—an approach the commission viewed favorably. She added that the governor's office has expressed support for the study and appreciation that state resources are being directed toward assessing and addressing Georgia's audiology workforce needs.

b. Annual Report

Commissioner Melanie Morris provided an update on the Language and Literacy Report, highlighting that this year represents a transition from the long-standing model in which Ms. Jenkins led report development. With funding support from the Georgia Department of Education, the commission has contracted Wilder Research Group of Minnesota to produce the 2025 report and to develop a streamlined, sustainable template for future annual reports. A draft is expected by January 27, with a final version anticipated by February 9, allowing time for commission review and feedback prior to distribution. The long-term objective is for the commission to utilize Wilder's template to independently produce future reports, thereby reducing workload while maintaining quality and impact.

Commissioner Morris clarified that data collection processes remain stable and continue to be managed by the Georgia Department of Public Health, which oversees newborn hearing screenings, diagnoses, and follow-up services. Although federal CDC funding for national aggregate surveillance has concluded, DPH has absorbed these responsibilities and will continue data surveillance and case management without disruption.

Mr. Rosica emphasized the importance of developing a more intentional dissemination and marketing strategy to maximize the report's impact, noting that while it has received national recognition and been requested by other states, it may be underutilized. The group agreed that clarifying the report's intended outcomes and target audiences would be a critical first step before implementing a broader outreach strategy, with Commissioner Morris suggesting alignment of dissemination efforts with specific policy and educational goals. Commissioner Amy Lederberg added that this year's report will feature expanded

literacy outcomes data, including both special education students and those receiving 504 accommodations, further strengthening the report's scope and relevance.

c. 501c(3)

The discussion shifted to the 501(c)(3) initiative project plan, with Commissioner Anne McQuade reporting that draft bylaws had been developed in collaboration with Commissioner Byron Smith and Commissioner Smith and subsequently reviewed by legal counsel from the governor's office, resulting in minor revisions. A conflict-of-interest policy remains to be finalized and incorporated. One outstanding issue involves determining the appropriate size of the foundation's board of directors, currently proposed as a minimum of three members and a maximum range of nine. Members expressed a preference for maintaining an odd number of directors, such as seven or nine, to facilitate effective voting, while preserving flexibility based on participation and engagement levels.

The group also reviewed proposed officer roles, including President, Treasurer, and Secretary. Some uncertainty remained as to whether a Treasurer had previously been selected; however, members indicated a willingness to serve where needed and expressed no strong preferences. It was clarified that officer selection is the responsibility of the directors and that the bylaws appropriately allow one individual to hold multiple offices if necessary. To ensure continuity and alignment between the entities, the bylaws specify that the Commission's Chair and Vice Chair will serve as ex officio voting members of the foundation's board for the duration of their Commission leadership terms.

Further discussion centered on board composition and governance safeguards. Members considered whether the bylaws should require that Commission members constitute a majority of the foundation's directors to maintain alignment with the Commission's mission and prevent the possibility of independent directors directing funds in ways inconsistent with the Commission's intent. Given that bylaw amendments require advance public notice, the group agreed that it was prudent to establish appropriate protections at the outset. A motion was made and seconded to amend the draft bylaws to require that a majority of foundation directors be Commission members; the motion passed. A subsequent motion to approve the bylaws as amended was also seconded and unanimously approved, with plans to circulate the final version electronically for votes from members not in attendance.

d. Creation of a Support Service Provider Program for DeafBlind adults in Georgia

Commissioner Anne McQuade provided an update on advocacy efforts to secure funding for Georgia's Support Service Provider (SSP) Program. She reported meeting with State Senator Kay Kirkpatrick to discuss the SSP legislation enacted in 2008, which remains in effect. The discussion clarified that new legislation is not required; rather, the primary barrier is obtaining funding to implement the existing law. Senator Kirkpatrick advised that engagement with the Governor's budget office would be necessary to pursue funding; however, because the current year's budget has already been finalized, any allocation would need to occur during the next budget cycle. As an interim measure, it was suggested that the relatively modest funding required could potentially be established as a line-item appropriation within an existing state agency capable of administering the program.

Commissioner McQuade further reported that conversations with the DeafBlind advocacy coalition identified several potential agencies to explore for administration of the program, including the Department of Human Services, the Department of Public Health, and DFCS. Planned next steps include initiating discussions with these agencies to assess feasibility and coordinating an in-person visit to the state capitol to engage key stakeholders. She also noted challenges stemming from a recently introduced bill addressing SSP services for children and college-age individuals, which has created confusion among lawmakers despite similar services already being provided through existing channels.

Ms. Jenkins cautioned that funding administered through a state agency may be subject to discretionary use and could be redirected, referring to prior experience. Commissioner McQuade acknowledged this concern and emphasized that while a one-year line-item pilot could provide a practical starting point, sustainable implementation will ultimately require securing funding through the Governor's formal budget process.

e. Implementing Hearing Loops in Key Public Places

The committee received an update from Commissioner Lederberg (based on a written report prepared by Commissioner Dabo) on ongoing efforts to install hearing loop systems in the Georgia State Capitol. A dedicated subcommittee has been advocating for the inclusion of hearing loops in both the House and Senate chambers, particularly in conjunction with recent renovation projects. Although installation had initially been anticipated during carpet replacement, facilities management instead implemented a WaveCast system. The subcommittee reported that the WaveCast technology has produced significant audio delays, rendering it ineffective for individuals using hearing aids, an issue the group had previously cautioned against. As a result, members recommended pursuing a refund from the vendor and exploring alternative assistive listening technologies.

The subcommittee is now evaluating Auracast, an emerging wireless broadcast technology that does not require physical loop installation beneath carpeting. While Auracast is viewed as a forward-looking solution, members acknowledged that compatibility remains limited, as not all hearing aids currently support the technology. The committee recognized the Capitol's AV specialist for supporting accessibility-focused recommendations but noted that those recommendations were reportedly overridden by facilities staff, despite the comparatively modest cost of hearing loop systems within the broader renovation budget.

The discussion also addressed potential advocacy activities at the Capitol, including Georgia Hearing Day. Members expressed uncertainty regarding event dates and whether collaboration with the Georgia Society of Hearing Professionals would align with the commission's mission and advocacy objectives. The importance of clarifying specific policy goals before participating in awareness events was emphasized. Additionally, it was noted that the DeafBlind community prefers to host a separate DeafBlind Day at the Capitol to ensure focused visibility and impact. With respect to Georgia Hearing Day, an annual gubernatorial proclamation intended to raise awareness about hearing health and professional hearing care, members observed that while the event took place in February 2025, no date has been announced for the current year. The group agreed that participation would be most meaningful if connected to a defined legislative objective rather than general

awareness, and plans were made to seek clarification regarding the event's purpose and potential policy focus before making a decision.

2. GA DOE, Office of State Schools, Outreach Services Report

The meeting featured a presentation by Dr. Jessica Bergeron, Outreach Director for the Office of State Schools at the Georgia Department of Education, highlighting the role of the annual Language and Literacy Report in supporting data-driven decision-making, guiding educational practices, and promoting accountability for outcomes for children who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHH). Dr. Bergeron provided an overview of the Office's restructuring, including the establishment of an Outreach Division overseeing seven programs for DHH and visually impaired students, and detailed initiatives such as the Georgia Mobile Audiology Program, which delivers diagnostic services particularly in rural areas through partnerships with the Department of Public Health and telehealth. She shared key findings on language deprivation and delayed early intervention, which have informed the development of the ASL Deaf Culture Program, "ASL at Home," collaboration with the AtLAS committee to support listening and spoken language and expanded early language services through Georgia PINES. Dr. Bergeron also addressed challenges related to late identification of hearing and vision loss, noting higher referral rates in areas with low literacy, and described partnerships that have enhanced early screenings and telehealth diagnostics. Additionally, she highlighted a recently launched interpreter training program offering free, RID-approved professional learning for educational interpreters and educators, as well as the Science of Reading initiative, which provides over ten professional learning modules developed with contributions from deaf educators and subject-matter experts to support literacy instruction for DHH students.

During the discussion, Commissioner Amy Lederberg recognized the long-standing collaboration between the Commission, the Deaf Community Partnership, and Georgia Pathways, expressing appreciation for progress achieved while raising concerns about future guidance and family support, particularly considering potential federal changes affecting the Department of Education. Dr. Bergeron responded that Georgia has experienced limited impact from federal changes and continues to provide early intervention services, emphasizing the importance of a family-centered approach and ongoing engagement. She highlighted outreach efforts, noting that approximately 50% of DHH children reside outside Atlanta and that services are intentionally structured to address rural gaps, as illustrated in the outreach services map shared during the meeting. Dr. Bergeron requested continued collaboration with the Commission, particularly regarding interpretation of findings, audience identification, and implementation of actionable recommendations.

3. Commission Initiatives

Commissioners were encouraged to propose new initiatives aligned with the Commission's mission, including areas such as emergency services access and expanded ASL interpreting within state offices.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:13 PM.