**Georgia Commission for the Deaf or Hard of Hearing Quarterly Meeting**

**Thursday, January 30, 2025**

**12:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.**

**Meeting Minutes**

**Members Present:** Dr. Stacey Tucci, Mr. Ibrahim Dabo, Dr. Amy Lederberg, Ms. Anne McQuade, Dr. Chelsea Tehan, Ms. Stormey Cone, Mr. Byron Smith, Dr. Alison Morrison, & Ms. Deanna Swope

**Members Absent:** Dr. Paula Harmon, Mr. Russell Fleming & Dr. Melanie Morris

**Guests**: Ms. Debbie Brilling, Mr. Mark Rosica, Ms. Kelly Jenkins, Mr. Jimmy Peterson, Ms. Ellen Rolader, Ms. Jennifer Clark, Ms. Sherry Nighbert, Ms. Erica Jones, Ms. Faith Shifford & Mr. Jonathan Brilling

**Interpreters:** Ms. Anne Zimmerman, Ms. Tavia Mays, Ms. Cecilia Epps & Ms. Jennifer Bowser

**Captioning:** The SOS Agency

1. **Old Business**

# **Call to Order and Approval of Minutes**

# Commissioner Lederberg called the meeting to order at 12:03 pm. The hybrid meeting was in person and virtual. The November meeting minutes were approved.

1. **Communication Norms**

The meeting began with a warm welcome to new and retiring commissioners. Commissioner Lederberg emphasized the importance of communication norms, such as identifying oneself before speaking, raising hands to avoid interruptions, and staying focused without side conversations. She also addressed the logistics of hybrid meetings, ensuring the availability of interpreters and breaks to prevent exhaustion, and asked for sensitivity when viewing slides to accommodate those following interpreters. Commissioners were encouraged to share feedback on communication improvements and email suggestions for enhancing the meeting experience, especially for virtual attendees.

Commissioner Lederberg introduced the four new commissioners --Stormey Cone, Byron Smith, Deanna Swope, and Russell Fleming (who was unable to attend.) Participants shared their backgrounds, a surprising fact about themselves, and their connection with the DHH and DB Community. Current commissioners offered advice to the new members.

# **History of the Georgia Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (GCDHH),**

The GCDHH, established in 2007 under Georgia Code 30-1-5, is dedicated to advocating for the needs of deaf, hard-of-hearing, and DeafBlind individuals throughout their lives, from early childhood to senior years. The commission advises the governor, state legislature, and various state agencies (such as Human Services, Community Health, and Education) on policies, funding, and initiatives affecting the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. A major part of its work involves raising public awareness and fostering collaboration with state, federal, and private organizations.

A key milestone came in 2013 with the passage of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children's Language and Literacy Bill, which expanded the commission’s mandate to focus on language and literacy acquisition outcomes for children from birth to third grade. This legislation also broadened the commission’s representation, including the appointment of the first-ever DeafBlind commissioner in 2018. Though the commission advocates for both the deaf and DeafBlind communities, there is still no standalone commission for the DeafBlind or the Blind in Georgia.

In 2023, the commission shifted its structure from standing committees to targeted working groups, enabling more focused efforts on specific initiatives. Each initiative is led by a commissioner, with the possibility of involving outside members to ensure alignment with the commission’s mission. This approach encourages active participation, clear goal-setting, and strategic planning to achieve meaningful outcomes for the community.

1. **Process for Commission Work**

The process for initiating and managing projects within the commission begins with an assessment that the initiative is aligned with GaCDHH mission. The initiative’s purpose is defined specifically, with ongoing feedback from the commission to refine and adjust the focus as needed. Once approved, a working group is formed, which can include additional members at any stage. Typically meeting virtually, the working group sets SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) that can be modified as the initiative progresses.

The commission is involved at each stage, providing feedback and approving the initiative. An action plan is developed once goals are set, and progress is monitored. Project leads present updates on their initiatives, summarizing accomplishments, progress, and next steps. Although initially, project leads were supposed to store progress reports a shared drive, it was found to be inefficient. Instead, working groups are encouraged to keep detailed minutes and notes, with updates presented at quarterly meetings and meeting minutes will be used to keep track of progress.

For any decision to be approved, at least 51% of the commission must be present, and a majority vote is required. However, unanimous approval is often reached due to the collaborative nature of the process. Questions can be asked throughout the discussion to ensure all participants are engaged and informed.

New commissioners are encouraged to join initiatives by contacting project leads, or to propose their own initiative.

1. **GaCDHH Initiatives, Progress Report, and Updates**
2. **Increase in Text-to-911 Availability**

The initiative aims to expand the ability to text 911 across Georgia, addressing the gaps in service availability across various regions of the state. The project leader, Commissioner McQuade, initially was surprised by the lack of this capability, has worked to raise awareness and gather support for the expansion. The Georgia Emergency Communications Authority oversees the process but serves in an advisory capacity, as 911 centers need to upgrade their equipment to enable text-to-911 services.

Commissioner Anne McQuade has collaborated with groups like domestic violence organizations and the commission to gather letters of endorsement, but while initial progress was made, further efforts to increase adoption were unsuccessful. To advance the initiative, the commission decided to host a panel discussion with 911 center directors, survivors, and other stakeholders to highlight the importance of text-to-911 services. Cobb County's 911 center director, a strong supporter of the initiative, will discuss the practical benefits of texting in emergency situations. The Georgia Emergency Communications Authority will provide expert guidance, and a statewide proposal for mandatory upgrades could potentially make text-to-911 a legal requirement, further pushing the initiative forward.

Dr. Tucci highlighted Sign 1 News as an international platform that could help spread awareness about the initiative to a broader audience, particularly for public awareness campaigns targeting the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. Ms. Faith Shifford mentioned the University of Georgia’s funding for 911 services, raising the possibility of expanding these services to the deaf community through university support. Commissioners discussed how to approach this, with Commissioner McQuade expressing interest in learning more about funding allocations and reaching out to contacts like the Public Relations office and the Board of Regents.

The discussion also touched on the legal angle, particularly regarding the lack of text-to-911 services for deaf-blind individuals. Commissioner McQuade emphasized the importance of making these services a legal requirement, while Dr. Tucci suggested exploring ADA requirements and involving civil rights organizations like the ACLU. Mr. Peterson reinforced the need for change, highlighting that deaf-blind individuals pay taxes for 911 services, but cannot access them.

To support the initiative, Commissioner McQuade proposed publishing a list of counties lacking text-to-911 services, and Commissioner Melanie Morris created a Google map to visually represent the service availability. Dr. Tucci suggested using some of the commission’s funds to hire an ADA lawyer for further legal support, with Commissioner Ibo offering a volunteer with extensive ADA advocacy experience who could help with legal action if needed. Commissioner McQuade also suggested connecting with Tim Pi, an advocate involved in ADA work, to potentially find a lawyer willing to take on the case.

1. **Creation of Support Services Provide Program for DeafBlind Adults in Georgia**

Commissioner McQuade presented her second initiative, which focuses on expanding the availability of support service providers for deaf-blind individuals in Georgia. These providers assist with communication, environmental information, and safe navigation, services that are currently limited in Georgia. While 30 similar programs exist nationwide, Georgia's services are restricted to a small group of individuals receiving vocational rehabilitation, representing only a fraction of the population in need.

Despite efforts to secure funding, the initiative requires legislative action to establish comprehensive services. Commissioner McQuade, along with the Deaf-Blind Advocacy Coalition, identified a 2008 law designed to establish these services, but it was never funded due to economic constraints. She is actively working to meet with Senator Gail Davenport, a proponent of establishing a commission for the blind in Georgia, with the goal of adding the support service provider bill to her legislative agenda. Commissioner McQuade and the team have gathered data, including estimated costs and statistics on the number of DeafBlind individuals in the state, but are still in search of a legislator to champion the initiative.

1. **ASL Vlogs**

Ms. Rolader provided an update on the ASL Vlogs initiative, a project aimed at improving accessibility for the Deaf community by offering American Sign Language (ASL) video logs on Georgia’s state website. Over the past two to three years, the initiative has worked to incorporate ASL content, as Georgia is one of the few states without ASL language options on its state website. The initiative is rooted in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and aims to create ASL Vlogs for key state agencies to enhance communication access for Deaf and ASL users.

The project has partnered with Mr. Aaron Shoemaker of All Hands On, alongside a team including Deaf interpreter David Cowan. They have produced two Vlogs to date, with more content in development. The initiative seeks to set an example for other agencies, providing guidance on how to incorporate ASL Vlogs on their websites.

Ms. Rolader highlighted the slow but positive progress and encouraged participation in the working group to help move the initiative forward. She also raised a need for a commissioner to take on the lead role for the project. The ASL Vlogs, which provide essential information such as the commission’s mission, goals, and membership, include signed communication with large closed captions to ensure accessibility. Commissioner McQuade clarified that these videos are designed to be replicable by other agencies, with Mr. Shoemaker overseeing production. The next steps involve reviewing and approving the videos, with the goal of advocating for other agencies to implement similar ASL video content.

Commissioner Lederberg emphasized the importance of having a commissioner take the lead on the project to ensure its completion, particularly for reviewing and modifying the videos. She also encouraged new commissioners to get involved and contribute to existing working groups based on their interests.

1. **Medical Professional Information Toolkit**

Commissioner Chelsea Tehan, a pediatrician, leads this initiative whose goal is to address the gap between failed newborn hearing screenings and the subsequent follow-up actions necessary for diagnostic testing and early intervention services. The project focuses on developing a comprehensive "medical toolkit" for pediatric offices, which includes informational posters and flyers in both English and Spanish. These materials outline hearing milestones for infants and toddlers, enabling families and healthcare providers to identify potential hearing issues early.

The posters and handouts feature QR codes that direct users to a website containing updated information on local audiologists, including their specialties, accepted insurance, and available services. Additionally, the website offers valuable resources on American Sign Language (ASL), Listening and Spoken Language (LSL), and other family support services.

Commissioner Tehan reported that the materials have been well-received in pediatric offices, with a notable increase in engagement, as evidenced by QR code scans. The initiative has already garnered attention and is expected to expand through statewide outreach, involving the Georgia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and audiology meetings. The ultimate objective is to bridge the gap in early hearing interventions, thereby improving long-term developmental outcomes for children.

Commissioner Tehan shared that she has worked with three clinics so far and outlined a plan for future visits. She noted challenges in obtaining approval from office managers to distribute the flyers but confirmed that Commissioner Harmon's team maintains a list of visited locations, which will be shared once distribution is underway. Commissioner Tehan also suggested using Google Drive as a centralized platform for easy access to the list.

Commissioner Tehan expressed her openness to collaborating with individuals who are interested in supporting flyer distribution, especially those with personal connections to local health offices or professionals. The aim is to ensure that the flyers are actively distributed and not left unused. Commissioner Tehan indicated that one-third of the flyers are stored at the Auditory Verbal Center, with Ms. Debbie Brilling overseeing their management.

1. **Georgia Medicaid and Medicaid CMO related to access to pediatric and adult audiologic services**

Commissioner Morrison discussed her work with the commission advocating for Medicaid changes, focusing on pediatric audiology in 2023. The commission identified barriers to timely audiology services for children and compared Medicaid coverage in Georgia with neighboring states. As a result, they presented eight recommendations to Medicaid, seven of which were successfully implemented by the end of 2024.

The commission has since expanded its focus to address adult Medicaid issues. Currently, adults under Medicaid receive no coverage for hearing services, a gap that is covered by Medicare. A new task force, including audiologists and ENTs, is working on addressing this issue. An external consultant confirmed that Georgia provides no coverage for adult hearing or vestibular services and recommended pursuing legislation to cover these services. The task force is set to meet again to discuss next steps, including finding a legislator to support the initiative and potentially pursuing legislation for the following year.

Ms. Shifford shared her work with Ms. Jolie Fainberg in 2023, advocating for Medicaid coverage of cochlear implant parts and services for individuals over 21. While progress was limited, particularly due to the lack of Medicaid expansion, Ms. Shifford expressed ongoing interest in expanding coverage for cochlear implants and hearing aids. She also highlighted her previous work with her local senator, Matt Bass, and his potential support. Faith emphasized the importance of pursuing direct legislation rather than relying solely on budget bills.

Commissioner Morrison acknowledged Ms. Shifford’s contributions and noted that Ms. Fainberg, who had success securing changes for cochlear implant parts, is already involved in the task force. Ms. Shifford was invited to join, and Commissioner Lederberg clarified that commission membership is not required to participate in working groups, inviting others passionate about the cause to contribute.

1. **Implementing Hearing Loops in Key Public Places**

Commissioner Ibrahim Dabo presented his initiative focused on promoting hearing loop technology to enhance accessibility for individuals with hearing loss. Inspired by his own experience with hearing aids, Commissioner Dabo highlighted the benefits of hearing loops, which connect hearing aids with telecoil capabilities to sound systems, improving clarity in settings like churches, conference centers, and government chambers. He shared updates on the progress of implementing hearing loops in the Georgia State Capitol, particularly in the Senate chambers, with strong support and successful collaboration with the Secretary of the Senate.

In addition to efforts at the State Capitol, Commissioner Dabo is working on improving accessibility at airports, starting with Delta Airlines. His initiative aims to install hearing loops in various airport areas and implement visual captioning systems in high-traffic zones to assist passengers with hearing

Commissioner Dabo emphasized the importance of leveraging external resources, including partnerships with advocacy groups and experts, to drive successful implementation of these initiatives. He encouraged new commissioners to get involved, underlining the potential for significant accessibility improvements in public spaces. Additionally, Commissioner Dabo discussed the importance of reasonable accommodation requests within the legislative environment, advocating for hearing loops as essential accommodations for senators and staff with hearing impairments.

Commissioner Lederberg provided further insight into the challenges related to the installation of hearing loops at the Georgia State Capitol, explaining that the need for carpet replacement as part of a renovation project has delayed progress. However, she expressed optimism that the hearing loop installation will be included in the renovation plan, despite the challenges of gaining full support from decision-makers. Commissioner Dabo also shared a personal connection with an advocate involved in the process, which has provided valuable support in promoting the hearing loop initiative.

1. **Annual Report Initiative**

Commissioner Morris is the project lead on the annual report of the language and literacy for DHH children in GA, a report required by law. Since Commissioner Morris was absent, Ms. Kelly Jenkins provided an overview of the report's progress. Ms. Jenkins shared that the annual report, which was traditionally 50-60 pages long, is being restructured to be more sustainable. The subcommittee, under Commissioner Morris’s leadership, reviewed various agency reports and conducted a survey to identify areas for improvement in the report for the following year. A new "Language and Literacy Dashboard" will be included in future reports to track the progress of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) children.

Ms. Jenkins highlighted that while only 17% of third-grade DHH students in special education currently read at grade level, the literacy rate has doubled over the past decade, reflecting the positive impact of the commission’s work and the Pathway Coalition. Despite this progress, the goal remains for 100% of these children to be reading at grade level by third grade.

Commissioner Lederberg mentioned that the annual report and related documents are available on the commission’s website. Dr. Tucci suggested transitioning to a more concise, digital one-pager format for future reports and offered to send an example of the one-pager to Commissioner Lederberg for distribution to the new commissioners.

The language and literacy report working group, like other initiatives, is open to new participants. The group will reconvene once Commissioner Morris returns from maternity leave to discuss the report format and strategies for continuing its production, especially following the loss of funding that previously supported Ms. Jenkins' involvement. The group will focus on brainstorming ways to achieve the report’s goals efficiently without excessive costs, while maximizing its impact. New commissioners and guests are encouraged to join the working group.

1. **Budget**

The commission’s budget is limited, with a one-time $20,000 allocation from the legislature already expended. This funding helped pay for a Medicaid consultant and supported Mr. Shoemaker’s work on the vlogs. A generous $20,000 donation from the McGowan Fund offers additional resources with more flexibility in spending. The commission follows a democratic process for approving funding initiatives: proposals are reviewed by the executive committee and voted on by the full commission.

Additionally, the commission is a member of the National Association of State Agencies for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NASADHH), which holds quarterly Zoom meetings to discuss updates on national and state-level activities. The commission values staying connected with this network for broader developments. The membership costs $200 annually, and after a motion by Commissioner Swope and a second from Commissioner Ibo, the commission voted to continue its membership with a majority vote.

The commission also discussed the possibility of establishing nonprofit status to gain financial independence and fundraise beyond external sources like the McGowan Fund. While this would require setting up a board and appointing roles, it is considered a potential future goal.

Additionally, there were discussions about creating formal email addresses for the commission. Although this has not been implemented yet due to budget constraints, it was recognized as an important step for the future. Dr. Tucci highlighted that securing a steady revenue stream, potentially through nonprofit status, would be key to supporting such initiatives.

In closing, Commissioner Lederberg asked new commissioners about any urgent projects they wished to discuss. Ms. Shifford raised the issue of the benefits and challenges of being affiliated with a state agency versus a nonprofit, particularly around access to resources and lobbying limitations. The discussion will continue in future meetings, and Commissioner Smith expressed interest in exploring the nonprofit status further. Commissioner Lederberg and Dr. Tucci confirmed the possibility of maintaining the commission’s role while establishing nonprofit status and encouraged Commissioner Smith to take the lead on this idea.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:58 PM

After the meeting was adjourned, Commissioner Lederberg announced that a survey would be sent to commission members to gauge interest in attending future meetings in person. Based on the responses, the meeting format may switch to virtual if in-person attendance is low. This survey will be conducted before each meeting, with the final decision on the meeting format being made two weeks prior. Mr. Peterson suggested consulting with Commissioner McQuade to ensure that any accessibility concerns related to the meeting format are taken into consideration.