

CALLER

THE COMMONWEALTH

Virginia Relay: Telecommunications services for people who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Deafblind or have difficulty speaking

Spring 2021

Virginia Relay Celebrates 30 Years of Accessible Telecommunications in the Commonwealth

At the request of consumer advisory groups, the 1989 Virginia General Assembly drafted and approved House Joint Resolution 272. This Resolution directed the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH) to study the feasibility of establishing a "Message Relay Service" for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Based on the study's recommendations, legislation passed in 1990 authorized VDDHH to establish and oversee Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) for text telephone users in the Commonwealth.

In cooperation with the State Corporation Commission, the Virginia Coalfield Authority and the City of Norton, extensive renovations to a vacant Piggly Wiggly grocery store provided a state-of-the-art home for Virginia's new Relay Center. In March 1991, former Lieutenant Governor Don Beyer placed the inaugural relay call to then VDDHH Director Lily Bess, launching a successful quarter of a century partnership with AT&T Relay Services. In its heyday, the Norton center provided relay services to seven states and housed over 250

relay operators, becoming one of the largest employers in the far southwest portion of the state.

Initially, Virginia Relay processed only TTY to Voice or Voice to TTY calls. Voice Carry Over (VCO) calls were added in 1992, Speech-to-Speech Relay in 2000, Captioned Telephone Services in 2004, Relay Text Messaging in 2005 and TTY Conference Call Access in 2006. Other notable milestones include direct 7-1-1 dialing access in 1999, Two-Line VCO in 2000, the establishment of a consumer-based Virginia Relay Advisory Council in 2002, a comprehensive Virginia Relay website in 2004, the successful Kids Keeping in Touch educational program in 2007 and the continuing Virginia Relay Partner Program in 2008. More recently, relay marketing programs targeted to seniors and veterans have been extremely successful.

With AT&T's departure from the relay industry in 2015, the Commonwealth negotiated a new contract with Hamilton Relay®, bringing new technology and outstanding outreach and customer service to Virginia Relay. One of



the most popular services added by Hamilton Relay was Remote Conference Captioning (RCC). Similar to real-time captioning, RCC enables a Virginian who is deaf or hard of hearing to participate fully in conference calls and approved virtual meetings.

Virginia Relay remains committed to providing quality accessible communications to all Virginians, regardless of their preferred device or service requirements. We look forward to another 30 years of serving Virginians!



Need communication access? We can help!

What is the Technology Assistance Program (TAP)?

The Technology Assistance Program (TAP) is offered by the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH). The program provides specialized telecommunication equipment to qualified Virginia residents who need different equipment, including TTYs and captioned telephones. TAP Trainers work with qualified residents one-on-one to help each person find the solution that best fits his or her communication needs.

Who is Eligible?

To qualify for TAP, you must be a Virginia resident who is Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind, late-deafened or has difficulty speaking. You must also meet the program's income requirements. Veterans with hearing loss who received an honorable discharge from the military are automatically eligible.

If your income exceeds the eligibility requirements, equipment can be provided at a discounted price or we can help you in finding the lowest price on the market.

What is Loan to Own?

For your convenience, qualified applicants are given their telecommunications equipment on a loan to own (L2O) basis. This means that you can use your chosen equipment in your home for 30 days to determine if it is the proper solution to fit your communication needs. If after the 30-day period you are satisfied with the device, it becomes yours to own. If not, you can return it and work with your TAP Trainer to find a new solution that works for you.

How Do I Get Started?

Call or visit the office near you to apply. To find the office in your community or to learn more, call 1-800-552-7917 (Voice/TTY) or visit www.vddhh.org/equipment.htm.

Check out the newest Virginia Relay Partners!

In Virginia, there are thousands of people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or who have difficulty speaking who count on Virginia Relay to connect with standard telephone users. Each day, hundreds of business calls are made through Virginia Relay. However, businesses that are unfamiliar with Virginia Relay may accidentally hang up on Relay callers, mistaking the call for a telemarketer.

Virginia Relay Partner is a free program designed to eliminate hang-ups that many Relay users experience by educating businesses on how to identify, receive and place Relay calls. Here are our newest Partners!

The Planning Council

Norfolk
theplanningcouncil.org

Virginia Career Works South Central Region

Charlotte Court House
vcwsouthcentral.com

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, Inc.

Roanoke
deafhh.org

Leisure Park Towers

Bristol
leisureparktowers.com

Sexual Assault Resource Agency

Charlottesville
saracville.com

Shenandoah Valley Workforce Development Board

Staunton
vcwvalley.com

Collins Center

Harrisonburg
thecollinscenter.org

VA Copes

Statewide
vacopes.com

Caroline County Public Schools - Parent Teacher Resource Center

Bowling Green
sped.blogs.ccps.us

Town of Blacksburg - Housing and Neighborhood Services

Blacksburg
blacksburg.gov

The Salvation Army of Roanoke Valley

Roanoke
salvationarmypotomac.org/roanokeva

To sign up to be a Relay Partner or to recommend a business for training, contact Virginia Relay Outreach Coordinator Eric Alvillar at eric.alvillar@hamiltonrelay.com.



Accessible Video Conference Platforms

Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Skype and Zoom are great communication tools for those working remote or wanting to socialize from a distance. With the onset of COVID-19 the use of these tools continues to rise. However, an increase of users also necessitates better sound and video quality, a simple interface for navigation and versatile functions.

The most notable addition made to each application this past year is the accessibility features. By including these options, the user base can continue to grow and become more diverse. Deaf and hard of hearing, or visually impaired individuals will have an easier time interacting with the program. Below are a few platforms and what they have to offer.



Google Meet

Google Meet offers the most accurate and highest quality for live or closed captions.

Auto-generated captions will include a speaker's name to help users keep track of bouncing conversations. Visually impaired individuals can also utilize the full-page zoom and high color contrast for easier visibility during meetings. Google Meet even has keyboard shortcuts that let the user control the camera, microphone and chat functions in a simple and straightforward manner.



Microsoft Teams

Microsoft Teams also offers a simple interface that includes auto-generated live captioning. Teams is screen reader accessible which allows a visually impaired member to keep track of different actions occurring on screen. Users can also view recorded meetings with a transcript when needed. The background blurring option is another feature that has a function other than aesthetics. A blurred background eliminates distractions and can assist lip readers trying to focus on specific members of their group.



zoom

Zoom has publicly announced that they are working

with accessibility organizations to tackle issues people with hearing, vision, mobility or cognitive difficulties may face while communicating via video. "Multi-pinning" is a new feature Zoom now includes. This function allows users to pin different chat windows into place. This will help users keep the video feed of a sign language interpreter stationary. Even new keyboard shortcuts provide a simple solution for visually impaired individuals that need to navigate, and control different Zoom functions.

To learn more about working with online video conferencing tools visit: <http://digitalaccessibility.vpit.virginia.edu/conferencingtools.php>



VDDHH is Now Hiring

Interpreter Services Manager

VDDHH is currently looking to fill an Interpreter Services Manager position. The position will manage the success and operations of the sign language Interpreter Services Program on behalf of government agencies and the courts, as well as the Virginia Quality Assurance Screening Program. To better serve VDDHH customers, the person will also be required to maintain contact with various stakeholders on federal, national, state and local levels.

To apply or learn more about the position visit:

virginiajobs.peopleadmin.com/postings/214692

Virginia Relay Manager

VDDHH works to reduce the communication barriers between persons who are deaf or hard of hearing and those who are hearing, including family members, service providers, and the general public. This position will serve as the Commonwealth's lead position for direct oversight of the federally mandated Telecommunications Relay Service, Virginia Relay, which administers the appropriations for compensation of telecommunications relay service provider and related contractors and provides supervision and oversight of the Technology Assistance Program (TAP). This position also directs and administers the Virginia Relay Advisory Council (VRAC) and researches and recommends new relay technology and specialized equipment/assistive technology for inclusion within the Virginia Relay and the TAP.

To learn more about the position and to apply, visit:

virginiajobs.peopleadmin.com/postings/214691



Virginia Department for the
Deaf and Hard of Hearing

College Scholarship Awarded to Virginia High School Senior by Hamilton Relay

May 1, 2021—Hamilton Relay, Telecommunications Relay and Captioned Telephone Service provider for the state of Virginia, has awarded a \$500 college scholarship to Xavier Lewis-Everson, a student of Bethel High School from Hampton, Virginia.

The Hamilton Relay Scholarship opportunity is available to high school seniors who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind or have difficulty speaking. A recipient is selected within each of the states where Hamilton is the contracted service provider and is one of several ways the company gives back to the communities it serves.

Xavier was awarded the \$500 Hamilton Relay Scholarship after completing the application process, including writing an essay under the topic of communication technology. Xavier plans to attend college this fall to study criminal justice.

"Hamilton takes pride in recognizing outstanding leadership and promoting education," Eric Alvillar, Virginia Outreach Coordinator. "We are excited to have the opportunity to contribute to futhering Xavier's education and wish him success in reaching his personal and professional goals."



Congratulations, Xavier!



Hamilton Relay provides contracted Traditional Relay and Captioned Telephone services through 21 contracts to 15 states, the District of Columbia and the Island of Saipan, and is a provider of Internet-based Captioned Telephone services nationwide. More information is available at www.hamiltonrelay.com.



Leslie Hutcheson on your retirement!

On December 31, 2020 Leslie retired from the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing after 34 ½ years of service with the agency and 4 years spent in the public school system in Southwest Virginia.

Leslie joined the VDDHH staff on June 16, 1986 and provided part-time support in legislative affairs, the newsletter and special projects. Within a year she became a full-time employee and continued to serve as a legislative liaison as well as being lead staff for a few legislative studies. Leslie also provided support during the legislative session at the

Secretary Health and Human Resources office for several years.

In addition, as the needs of the agency changed, Leslie's role changed with them. She began handling several special projects, two statewide conferences and served as staff to the VDDHH Advisory Board during her tenure. Leslie even served as an Outreach Program Manager for several years, provided oversight for the agency's library and served as the Interpreter Programs Manager since 2006.

In her retirement, Leslie plans to spend time in Maine and in Europe, starting



with Sweden. She has plans to visit every Major League ballpark, work on her family history and wander trails in the woods every chance she gets.

Virginia Lifeline Program Focusses on Overcoming the Digital Divide

Qualifying telephone service consumers can receive assistance through a low-income program called Lifeline. The program is one of two that the FCC's Universal Service Fund and Virginia State Corporation Commission has in place for residents across the nation. Lifeline specifically focuses on providing a discount for consumer's monthly telephone services as a way to ensure that all residents have access to communication.

Select wireline and wireless telephone companies work with Lifeline to aid with enrollment and provide a minimum discount of \$9.25. The discount is applied towards an eligible phone or broadband service. However, companies are not required to offer Lifeline service at time of enrollment. Locals are encouraged to contact their surrounding telecommunication companies and ask if they offer Lifeline services.

It should be noted that the FCC program does limit one Lifeline benefit per household and has certain qualifications that must be met. To be considered eligible for the program a resident must fall below a set income-level or participate in one of the following federal assistance programs:

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Medicaid
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- Federal Public Housing Assistance (FPHA)
- Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit

To inquire about eligibility in your local area, visit the newest website checklifeline.org today!



Lifeline



Overcoming the digital divide & opening doors to opportunity

Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
1602 Rolling Hills Drive, Suite 203
Henrico, Virginia 23229-5012

Visit us at www.varelay.org



Find Us on Facebook!

Virginia Relay and VDDHH both have Facebook pages! Just type "Virginia Relay" or "VDDHH" in Facebook's search field and click the "Like" button at the top of the page to get regular updates on Virginia news, events and more.

VDDHH Staff

Eric Raff

Director

Christine Ruderson

TAP Manager

Brittany Howard

TAP Specialist Coordinator

Karen Brimm

Community Services Manager

Paul Stuessy

Community Services Specialist

Pamela Dorman

Interpreter Services Program
Specialist

Elaine Ziehl

Virginia Quality Assurance
Screening Coordinator

Rhonda Jeter

Business Manager

Virginia Melville

Administrative Assistant



Virginia Department for the
Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Aug. 3, 2021

VDDHH Advisory Board

Meeting via Zoom
10 a.m. - 12 p.m.

More information will be posted
on the VDDHH Facebook page.

Virginia Relay Advisory Council (VRAC)

Consumer Members:

Paige Berry

Representing Hearing Relay Users

Kerry Byrne

Representing Virginia Centers for
Independent Living

Alissa Conover

Representing Virginia Association of
the Deaf (VAD)

Karen Darnier

Representing Speech-Language-
Hearing Association of Virginia
(SHAV)

Lisa Harbour

Representing Association of Late-
Deafened Adults (ALDA)

William Hess

Representing Voice Carry-Over Users

Rebecca Ladew

Representing Speech-to-Speech Users

Doral Jackson

Representing Hearing Relay Users

Jenny McKenzie

Representing Virginia Association of
the DeafBlind (VADB)

Teresa Ritzert

Representing Captioned Telephone
Service Users

Christine Ross

Representing Video Relay Service Users

Linda Wallace

Representing Hearing Loss
Association of America
(HLAA) Virginia Chapters

Non-Voting Members:

Eric Alvillar

Hamilton Relay

Christa Cervantes

Hamilton Relay

Mary Nunnally

Department for Aging and
Rehabilitative Services

Eric Raff

VDDHH Director