

Report Highlights

Commonwealth Services for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired

Senate Resolution 76 directed the LB&FC to review state services for the deaf and hard of hearing. Pennsylvania is one of 33 states in the United States with an Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH).

Study Findings:

- Nationwide, 4.9 infants per 10,000 in well baby nurseries and 48 per 10,000 in neonatal intensive care nurseries are born with permanent moderate degree or greater hearing loss.
- The deaf and hard of hearing are highly diverse, with their diversity reflected in part in their multiple modes of communication, which include Speech, Speech Reading, Cued Speech, Manually Coded English Sign, and American Sign Language (ASL).
- Many programs offer ASL classes, but no single site identifies all the organizations that offer such classes. Signing classes are important because sign or speech and sign are the primary communication modes for 27 percent of Pennsylvania students in special education.
- Federal statutes require “reasonable” accommodations to access public programs. Federal court interpretations of these statutes base reasonableness on multiple case specific factors.
- The Commonwealth has policies to comply with federal statutes that address sign language, but not for other types of interpreters, such as oral, cued speech, foreign sign, and those who work with the mentally retarded.
- 99 percent of PA newborns are screened through a Department of Health program enacted by the General Assembly in 2001, and early intervention programs are serving more hearing impaired children.
- The Department of Education (PDE) provides training for educational interpreters, and funds four PA magnet schools for deaf and hearing impaired children. In total, PA school districts serve about 2,800 hearing impaired children with individual educational programs (IEP).
- The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), has deaf and hard of hearing counselors in district offices who communicate in sign, spends over \$9 million annually to assist the hearing

impaired to gain employment, and provides post secondary vocational training through a special Hiram G. Andrews Center program.

- The Department of Public Welfare serves the hearing impaired in mental health and mental retardation facilities, cash and medical assistance programs (MA), and local human service programs, and provides online access to key programs. MA pays for teachers of the hearing impaired in special education, provides interpreters for MA recipients, and offers hearing aids, cochlear implants, and assistive technology as covered benefits for children, among other benefits. DPW also sponsors training, including continuing education for interpreters.
- ODHH permits those with national certification but not graduates of interpreter training programs on its interpreter registry, despite interpreter shortages in many areas.

Recommendations:

- ODHH should update and provide additional information at its website about state programs serving the deaf and hearing impaired.
- Commonwealth policies on purchase of interpreter services should be reviewed to ensure full compliance with federal requirements.
- PDE should work with the State Board of Ed. to develop educational interpreter standards.
- ODHH should allow graduates of interpreter training programs on its registry of interpreters.
- DPW should continue to support efforts to develop a residential treatment program for emotionally disturbed hearing impaired youth in southeast PA, develop training and identify best practices for county children and youth agencies, and continue to assure its contractors are familiar with requirements for MA special needs services for the hearing impaired.