

Community Comments on Saturday August 13, 2022

Steve Longo opened the meeting with greetings and thanked people for coming. Bylaws have been submitted and are still being reviewed. It takes time for the lawyer to carefully review everything and make sure everything is accurate and up-to-date. The board has seven board members total, but three could not come (one could not come due to a schedule conflict and the other two are out sick). Steve Longo introduced Jesse Lewis, Project Manager of DHHSC, to share about community's feedback about DHHSC's services and programs.

Jesse Lewis discussed two things: 1) clients feedback over the past year and 2) the advisory council elections.

Not many clients filled out the feedback form but we will still encourage the community to share feedback.

Questions that were asked on the survey include:

- If you do not go to DHHSC's workshops, what stops you from going?
- If you do not go to DHHSC's other events, such as Martha's Vineyard in the Central Valley, what stops you from going?
- If you do not request services from DHHSC, why not?
- What services and/or events would you like to see offered through DHHSC?
- If you could change anything about DHHSC, what would it be?
- If you had to pick one (1) of these for DHHSC to focus on doing systems advocacy efforts, which do you think is most needed?

Jesse Lewis shared the collected feedback. (Please see the PowerPoint attached). Please do ask for the survey and fill it out. DHHSC staff can also help explain the form if needed (providing the document translation).

Regarding Advisory Council Elections, if you are interested in joining the Advisory Council (AC), please see Jesse Lewis after the meeting and more information will be posted online.

Duties required for an AC member:

- Meet 4 x a year, minimum
- Ask the community for their opinions, concerns, or input
- Inform the community about the agency (DHHSC)
- Help with the special events hosted by DHHSC

Other important information regarding being on AC is that with the Fresno AC, we can have up to eight members, but right now we have none.

AC membership term - 3-year term and can do two 3-year terms (serving six years in a row total).

In meetings, usually discuss concerns, opinions, and feedback, and then Jesse will pass on relevant information to the Executive Director and/or to the board to review.

If you are interested in joining the AC, please contact Jesse at JesseL@dhhsc.org.

Steve Longo: AC is similar to the board but two differences are that the board supervises the Executive Director and can vote, and the AC is monitored by both DHHSC management and board.

The board members have to go through an interview process and communicate with the Executive Director, and the AC functions more as community representatives and communicate/stay in touch with Jesse.

This meeting today is more for the community, to share their feelings, concerns, etc. to propose any topic for discussion.

For example, Video Relay Interpreting (VRI), at hospitals, may not be an answer to all of the problems.

The question is where and when can we use VRI?

Steve Longo introduces DHHSC Executive Director, Michelle Bronson, to share the information she has gathered.

Michelle explained that there was an increase in usage during the COVID pandemic, mostly because of health and safety concerns. Even though life is slowly returning back to normal again, we can see that VRI is here to stay, especially due to a nationwide shortage of interpreters.

Disability Rights of California (DRC) will be providing an ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) workshop this afternoon after the meeting and the community is highly encouraged to attend.

DRC worked with DHHSC on issues relating to DOR (Department of Rehabilitation) years ago and they were successful in getting the previous RCD (Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf) transferred to another unit and placing a new RCD on the job. DRC and DHHSC are now working on an issue involving hospitals in the area; they are using VRI instead of live interpreters. If you have any concerns related to hospitals, please come this afternoon to the workshop and meet with a lawyer to file a complaint.

Michelle has asked DRC for when it is not appropriate to use VRI and the following is a list based on their findings:

- DeafBlind
- Deaf Plus
- Deaf who are visually challenged
- Deaf with back and mobility issues
- Children

In a desperate need for sign language interpreters, even many colleges are struggling to find in person interpreters.

If there is no in-person interpreter available, what to do?

VRI continues to be a challenge but can provide effective communication for some. It is very important to know what your rights are and to self-advocate.

Michelle does provide trainings on effective communication, and effective communication for one person may not be effective communication for another person; it is different for each individual. One method of communication may work for one person but not work for another. Michelle can provide trainings but wants to emphasize that if there are no complaints or requests for advocacy, then they will assume that you are fine and there are no issues.

If you have an issue, you can contact DHHSC and they will work with you and provide advocacy.

YOU need to speak up; please come this afternoon for the workshop and contact DHHSC anytime you need assistance and/or advocacy.

Steve would like to add one more thing to the list for those who should not use VRI and that is in classrooms or educational settings. Too hard for Video Remote Interpreters to hear everything that is happening in the room and catch what other people are saying. Best to be in the room in-person so you can see what is happening; while on the screen, you can't catch what is happening off-screen. Cannot emphasize this enough.

We have added two new board members and would like to introduce them. First one is Christian Gentile.

Christian Gentile introduced himself and explained that he works at VCH (Valley Children's Hospital) and joined the board because he works with children who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing and want to support them and their families more.

Next new board member is Patty Killough. Patty Killough introduced herself and explained that she is from Salinas and used to work at the DHHSC Salinas office where Krystal Rios (one of the DHHSC staff) currently works. She is involved with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community and became a Deaf Educator a few years ago but now teaches ASL in mainstream classes with both hearing and Deaf students.

As Michelle mentioned about VRI, Patty experienced VRI in her classroom with a Deaf student and it was really difficult and added more work to her role as a teacher. They did not have enough interpreters and had no choice. Fortunately, this year there are enough sign language interpreters and she does not have to deal with VRI in her classroom.

Steve also introduced the other board member, Jaime Johnson-Clay.

Jaime Johnson-Clay introduced herself as having three children and all are CODAs (Children of the Deaf Adults). However, she and her family were shocked that her last child was identified as Hard of Hearing in October. Doctor explained that there is a gene in their family because both Jaime and the child's father are Deaf. Jaime will have been on the board for two years in December. Also added that she is from Madera.

Steve Longo explained that it is important to have board members from areas that DHHSC serves and to have a wide representation of the people we serve, to provide good balance. We have Deaf, Hard of Hearing, hearing, people of color, etc. to represent a wide diversity on our board.

The board hopes to recruit more members.

The reason the board had to revise the bylaws was because they were old and had some errors. The bylaws also needed to be updated with the current (12th) version of Robert Rules of Order (RRO). The purpose of RRO is to help run the meetings more effectively. In the current RRO version, the board members can attend ZOOM meetings if they are sick but cannot attend in-person meetings. Steve liked how he could add that section in the revised bylaws, which is one example of the changes they have made.

The requirement for the board to meet is a minimum of four times a year. While Steve would like to get together more often and take action on needed tasks, meeting four times a year is just the minimum. Regarding board policies and procedures, they are not what the board had before but is working on now. It is to help the board know how to run meetings and conduct affairs properly. Following proper procedures help us represent DHHSC in a positive light. Also established an interview process for board recruits. Steve wants the bylaws to be static, and for the board, to keep policies and procedures flexible and easily adaptable as needed. Those are goals for the board.

If you want to join the board, please let Steve know.

Regarding VDF (Valley Deaf Festival), we haven't had it in two years but we are finally doing it again this year. Michelle will explain about VDF and DHHSC's 40th Anniversary coming up in two years. VDF is one of the biggest events for DHHSC and is held here in Fresno.

It will take time to start planning, contacting people, and finding a place to host the 40th anniversary but the process already has started. More details to be shared at a later date.

Michelle is thrilled to have board members from each area of our four offices. The first time that has ever happened, to Michelle's knowledge. This is made possible by using Zoom to connect board members from each area. Would have been difficult to do if required in-person meetings, but because of Zoom, we can pull in members from different areas. Nicole and Jessica are from Visalia, Patty from Salinas, Jaime from Madera, and all others from Fresno. Thank you, Jesse, for helping recruit board members! If you are not sure about joining, try starting with an AC to get an idea of how things are run and then can join the board if still interested. Doesn't hurt to try!

This is the 31st year doing VDF but we had to postpone the event for two years due to COVID-19. It will be good to have people come in-person because of being isolated during the pandemic. We will follow safety procedures by providing masks and hand sanitizers. We also rented a bigger building to provide more space among people for social distancing. While we are excited to resume VDF in person, we were dismayed that prices have gone up, including the building fees, food, decorations, table and chairs, draperies, etc. That's why the cost of tickets has gone up. We will have a Deaf performer named Justin Perez to perform at VDF. The event is on Nov. 19th, from 10 am - 4 pm. The theme will be based on Wizard of Oz: "There's No Place Like DHHSC." Michelle went to Cambria recently, and because they are having a Wizard of the Oz play this month, she is hoping to get their decorations donated or at low cost. One of her staff has been contacting Cambria's Chamber of Commerce to request the decorations and we should be receiving word soon. The contact person seems positive that we will get the decorations, fingers crossed! The board also decided on providing tacos for VDF.

Steve Longo wanted to mention that VDF has been a big success in the past, thanks to the students who attended VDF. Steve asks that teachers encourage their students to attend VDF. He also likes DHHSC's idea to make monthly payments on tickets; it's a good idea to put a bit of money aside each month to pay for ticket admissions. Easier

on the budget for some people. It is also hard to get sponsors now because of rising costs and businesses are struggling. We're seeing fewer donations this year already. Thank you Michelle for her brief on VDF, and in two years, we will be having DHHSC's 40th Anniversary, many things are happening!

Now don't forget the purpose of this meeting is for the community to provide feedback. It is important because the board does want to hear comments and concerns from the community so we can discuss and address the concerns.

Now it is time to open for Community Comments:

Darci Lessard just graduated from FSU's Master's program and is now a staff who works at FCC (Fresno City College) and Oakhurst college. I do understand VRI, and it is fine for simple situations, but it is not easy when teachers are constantly walking back and forth, VRI often freezing or having a poor connection, and interpreters are not always available. It is very frustrating. I like having live interpreters because then I would already know who they are and be able to establish rapport.

Issues with interpreters in class: Constantly interrupting while she (Darci) teaches, asking how she wants them to translate. Says it's their responsibility and job to know what they are doing. She asks if they are certified, and many say no. Darci is shocked they work for VRI companies. Would ask them how they know ASL, and they would say they grew up with a Deaf friend. She emphasizes that doesn't mean they are qualified or skilled enough, just knowing one Deaf person.

What Darci is asking from the community is to please encourage more interpreters for both VRI and in-person, even though Darci always prefers having a live interpreter. If VRI is the last option, she will make do.

Darci said to blame whoever is coordinating interpreters' schedules.

Many Deaf students at FCC are assigned with VRI and are very uncomfortable, and it does not work for them. What they really need is a DI (Deaf Interpreter). They were told no, and the decision was made by the interpreter coordinator and administrators. As staff, Darci is fed up with seeing that and acknowledges that it's a tough situation. Again, many people do not fully understand the purpose of interpreting services, the downside of VRI, and lack of access has impacted Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals and staff.

Darci said that she already tested not having interpreters in her ASL classes throughout the year and observed that many students became overwhelmed and dropped out. In

classes with interpreters, not many students dropped out. Noticeable difference in provision of or lack in interpreters; not just affects staff but students too!

Darci is sad to see that many people do not want to learn about the ADA or their rights. The community needs to know their rights in order to protect themselves.

Steve Longo said the key in self-advocacy is to know your rights and be educated on the laws. Many Deaf do not their rights. DHHSC can help the community. ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) was signed in 1990 by President Bush. Was it perfect? No. What is missing? CERTIFIED interpreter. It does not say or explain the qualifications.

Michelle Bronson wanted to respond to Darci's comment on VRI and explain that under "reasonable accommodations," many would often say there are not enough interpreters and it became their common response to queries why they don't call for a live interpreter. It is the reason why we need to encourage young people who are in high school to start thinking about going into an interpreter training program. We need to recruit more interpreters and get more people interested in the field. Colleges and universities also need to recruit.

DHHSC also teaches youth through our Youth Employment Services (YES!) about the ADA and other laws that protect their rights. Agreed with Darci that many do not know their rights and need to learn in order to protect themselves and self-advocate.

Maximilian Perry and Meredith Thomas from EMBR Solar partner with United Way and would like to share with the community about getting free solar panels and free back-up power. Contact info is: 505-446-2416. Thanked us for a moment of our time.

Steve Longo emphasized that this meeting is for Community Comments related to DHHSC.

Jesus Soto wanted to talk about his own experiences relating to VRI and in response to Darci's comments. He had an appointment with Fresno Cancer Center and they were going to use VRI for appointments, but Jesus explained that VRI often has problems with the screen, does not work, and asked for a live interpreter because it was a serious meeting with many people involved. Explained that if they use VRI, it would be a waste of his time and his insurance would still have to pay. His doctor was very nice and understanding, but responses from different places are varied. They had to postpone his appointment until they were finally able to find a live interpreter. It was so important to have a live interpreter for in-depth appointments at Fresno Cancer Center.

Steve Longo said that VRI depends heavily on technology, such as Wi-Fi and clarity of screen when live interpreters do not require technology. The screen not working is unacceptable. Poor connection is unacceptable.

Michelle Bronson wanted to add that many people in the community have put the blame on DHHSC for not providing interpreters, and DHHSC is very frustrated and tired of hearing those comments because it is not true due to many places or businesses not contacting DHHSC to request an interpreter. So whenever scheduling an appointment, please ask which agency and name of the interpreter, make a request for an interpreter in advance to increase chances of getting an interpreter, and follow up. By asking for name of the interpreter, it helps to force them to say what they have done on their part. DHHSC is trying their best with filling interpreting assignments with 1-2 weeks advance notice, but when DHHSC gets a call on the day of the appointment, it is not guaranteed because most of the interpreters are already out in the field on their assignments. It is not fair to DHHSC when they get blamed for not providing an interpreter when DHHSC has not even been contacted. Michelle is asking the community for their help by doing their part on self-advocacy when calling and requesting for an interpreter.

Jaime Johnson-Clay commented that when she called to schedule an appointment and requested an interpreter, she was told that she could bring her own interpreter. She had to tell them that it is their responsibility to provide an interpreter. A week later, she found out that they did not call for an interpreter and had to postpone her appointment. When rescheduling, Jaime told them they better do their job. The Sorenson interpreter even spoke to the office and told them to never do that to her (Jaime) again. Jaime gave the doctor's office a copy of the ADA and it was passed along to all the nurses. She hopes that things will go smoothly next time.

Steve Longo explained that Jaime's experience provided a good example of what many Deaf people experience everyday. Deaf people should not be told to bring their own interpreter or have to call and check if they have one. They can ask DHHSC to help with contacting different companies to advocate and educate about hiring interpreters. Many companies are ignorant and/or uneducated about their responsibility to provide accommodations, including an interpreter. There are many other issues that we need to talk about other than VRI. VRI can take all day so please bring up any other issues that the community may have.

Janel Birrenkott wanted to comment that she had experienced using VRI at St. Agnes Hospital, and one positive thing about having VRI is that it's readily accessible and right there compared to having to wait half an hour to an hour for an interpreter to show up.

Steve Longo explained the guidelines for using VRI is knowing where and when to use it appropriately.

The workshop this afternoon will explain and discuss this topic more, but would like to address any other important issues that the community may have.

Darci Lessard went through some life changes and wanted to apply for Section 8 Housing, but was shocked to find out that they are not accepting people right now. She was on the waiting list in 2017 but was removed because she did not get a call to show up at court or respond to the emails they sent to her. The reason Section 8 housing is not accepting people right now and cutting off their services is because of cuts in federal funding. She wants to warn the community to watch for the domino effect and to find ways to survive. She is worried for herself and for others, such as Deaf people, people in poverty, and the homeless.

Steve Longo agreed with Darci and said that before 2018, Section 8 Housing was a really good program to help the Deaf, but then Ben Carson was put in charge of housing and was inept. He is a doctor by profession. Ben Carson decided to cut back Section 8 Housing. The current person who is in charge of housing has the difficult task of reversing the rules since it has been signed. Any changes have to go through the House and Senate. The House and Senate should be focused on the country, not its parties, and should be looking at the history of Section 8 Housing for its positives and negatives and what can be improved.

Patty Killough brought up her experience as a teacher doing CPS reports or welfare checks on the Deaf or Deaf Plus students, and often the police wouldn't say if they brought in an interpreter for communication. Last year, someone from the Deaf program at school was brought in with the police to interpret and it was quite awkward. Sometimes VRI is brought in, sometimes DIs (Deaf Interpreters) are brought in, sometimes no interpreter is brought in. Each situation varies.

Steve Longo commented that it shouldn't be an excuse to not bring an interpreter in for those types of situations and it's the reason why we need more interpreters. This is what DHHSC is here for, to support the community and clients to provide advocacy and to ensure that the community is provided with full access. There are many cases like this example, and it is important to provide full access to communication. For example, there are also cases related with hearing children who have Deaf parents and when the Deaf parents aren't provided with an interpreter, the situation can be easily misunderstood and the child is taken away. It is SO important to provide an interpreter

for the Deaf to make sure providers are doing the right thing with decisions being made about the Deaf and their families.

One time Steve had to do work similar to a CDI (Certified Deaf Interpreter), and he was asked to help with a court case that involved a Deaf man from Mexico who did not know any ASL and only knew gestures/home signs. Steve had to figure out how to communicate with the Deaf man and eventually figured out that the Deaf man did not know what American police looked like and ran away due to becoming scared, which led to getting arrested and put in jail for two weeks. He did not know why he was arrested. That is one of many examples of why it is so critical to provide full access to immigration issues for Deaf people.

Darci Lessard had a last comment, wanting to suggest that when it comes to advertising, DHHSC needs less wording and more images on flyers due to being too wordy. People will become overwhelmed and DHHSC needs to keep it simple by putting only important information on the flier, such as location, time, etc. The flier for Community Comments was too wordy.

Steve Longo agreed that the flier was too wordy and that flyers as a whole should be straight to the point and concise. Steve has seen successful advertising that comes with both a VLOG with the flyer side by side, which is very nice to have.

Steve Longo said it is time to wrap up since it is almost noon. DRC is providing lunch from noon to 1 PM and the community is encouraged to attend the workshop on ADA rights after lunch. Steve thanked everyone for coming.

Meeting is closed.