

Commission on Disabilities - Meeting Minutes

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

February 13, 2023, 6:00 – 7:30 pm

Present: Tricia Palluzzi, Annie Harper, Sally Esposito, Grisel Aguilar, Arya Singh, Sandra Roberts, Billy Huang

Absent: Linda McDonough

Staff: Gretchen Knauff

Guests: Ben Bond, Yash Wadwekar, Heather LaTorra, Kio Sotillo, Julia Silvestri, Melissa Dennis, Yash Wadwekar, R. Tousey-Ayers

I. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Chair B. Huang at 6:07 PM.

II. Introductions

All Commission members introduced themselves, after which A. Harper introduced the guests who were involved in writing the letter about ASL resources to the Mayor of New Haven. Julia Silvestri coordinates the ASL program at Yale. Melissa Dennis is a Clinician of the Deaf at Connecticut Mental Health Center. Heather LaTorra is the Executive Director of Marrakech. Yash Wadwekar attended as a Yale student working for the Yale Daily News.

III. Approval of January minutes.

The Commission Members agreed to table the minutes from the prior month's meeting.

IV. Old Business

A. Updates/Discussion

Effective Communication

B. Huang summarized the letter that was sent by the workgroup to the Mayor, and the response letter that was sent out a few months later by the Chief of Staff, Sean Matteson. The group reviewed the response item by item.

1. Training for Department Heads: J. Silvestri – Yale's ASL program has students involved in service projects as part of their curriculum. Last semester, they provided basic ASL training to first responders. Plan to expand this semester. It is available to the public for anyone who is interested.

M. Dennis – police/emergency responders have access to LifeBridge for ASL but not all are aware of it. There is a need to enforce accountability of police. They do have a video relay system but does not work well for many people, often breaks down. Have heard stories where police rely on family for interpretation rather than seeking outside interpreter which is a problem as the family member may be the perpetrator. Need a public video phone system in a central area in New Haven for use if a person doesn't have access at home.

Note that in 90% of cases family members do not know ASL. Melissa has a contact at the police who is interested in helping ensure that everyone is aware of the policies and procedures and knows how to use the system.

J. Silvestri – our training is just basic ASL. Nobody at our training mentioned if they are aware of the support systems that exist. We could add that to our training. But we could do more advanced training if we can pull in people to come to provide that expertise. B. Huang – would be helpful to know more about this training.

G. Knauff – from the ADA perspective it would be great to have a contract and require the police to have hands-on training in how to use the system. Learning some basic ASL and other methods to help communicate are great but need to make sure that the police know that from the legal perspective they must get registered. G. Knauff – would be great if basic ASL training could be done for Department heads. Paramount that people don't rely on family.

R. Tousey-Ayers got notification that Yale-New Haven hospital is hiring for new call center, we should ensure that they hire ASL fluent people.

Possible next steps: Clarify to the Mayor that the training suggested is not for all ERs to communicate in ASL, but rather I use of the devices they already have.

2. Streamlining Of Press Conferences: G. Knauff – when she sees press releases about key events/public health events she inquires if they have arranged for an ASL interpreter. Usually, the answer is no. Is trying to increase awareness about this. At the recent mayor's speech, she ensured that ASL interpretation was visible and highlighted. Have to do constant reminders. Community members should complain when ASL was not available.

J. Silvestri – frustrated with the response – our focus was on interpretation for emergency announcements – this is a legal requirement. They need to understand it is their obligation, it is non-negotiable. There is flexibility with other events. But for emergencies, it is not optional.

3. Additional Vendors For ASL: G. Knauff has had conversation about having access to other interpreters if LifeBridge is not available. J. Silvestri – suggests Source, CoSign and Sorenson Community Interpreting. G. Knauff is setting up a new mechanism for accessing a range of interpreters. Would be ideal to have a full-time interpreter housed in communications department, in conjunction with emergency interpreting service. J. Silvestri – ideal to have a person who is deaf, but as long as have a good signer, it works. I do think we have enough people available who could come quickly when needed. J. Silvestri - Massachusetts commission has their own list of interpreters they can hire directly so save money on agencies.
4. Increased budget: G. Knauff – she has tiny budget but last year she requested an additional \$20,000 for all accommodations including ASL, so she has that. Next step is ensuring that people ask for it. She does not have any control over the budget. People who live in New Haven should talk to their Alders. The more

we request ASL interpreters, the more we spend, the greater the justification there is to hire a full-time person. If we had a person on staff more people might use the service!

Next Steps - B. Huang – what would be best next step? Another letter? A meeting?

M. Dennis – agrees that a meeting, back and forth dialogue is a good idea. Writing a letter doesn't always get understood fully, deaf culture is different, better to meet in person.

G. Knauff – commission could write to the mayor, tell that letter authors came to our meeting and would like us to organize a meeting with the mayor.

B. Huang – should be done in short order. Prior to the meeting will send some brief bullet points listing key topics for discussion. G. Knauff – better not to send a letter in advance otherwise they'll just be ready to respond. Better to have meeting first, then send something written later.

B. Huang – who should we ask to be at that meeting? Maybe J. Silvestri could invite some of the first responders who attended the Yale training. G. Knauff – don't want to be overwhelming but do need enough for discussion. Don't need too many people in the room. Need to be able to explain how important this is.

B. Huang – we should create an agenda together. M. Dennis – people tend to come to her agency to get information interpreted – they ask her and her one interpreter what is going on, she would like to see the City take more responsibility for this issue. B. Huang – could help to have a standing group that takes lead on this issue.

G. Aguilar – do we know how many people in New Haven are hearing impaired? J. Silvestri – is 4.2% of adult population.

K. Sotillo – working with a high school student who is deaf, although she has an interpreter, sometimes she is not able to communicate with her peers. She only recently got ASL support so is not able to communicate fluently in ASL. M. Dennis – this is sad but a common story. K. Sotillo – grateful for any information, this is new for me. Her son has hearing loss but has not needed ASL. M. Dennis – shares her information. J. Silvestri – in New Haven Academy they started to offer ASL classes and have an ASL club, there is a lot of interest. Yale students are involved in tutoring those students. Please connect with me about that!

B. Huang – next steps:

- Short term – need streamlined list of vendors, training for emergency responders so they can use the devices they have, longer term.
- Build funding capacity of Disability Services office to be able to provide ASL to all who need it.
- G. Knauff and A. Harper will take steps to set up meeting/craft agenda collectively. Will aim for something in early March.

V. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:36pm.