

DATE: April 10, 2025

TIME: 12:30-1:30pm

ATTENDED: Dr. Noe Turcios– Statewide Coordinator of Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) (joined in 2021)

Dr. Ju-Lee Wolsey, Supervisor of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Unit (DHHU) (joined in July of 2023)

Director Usherla DeBerry – ODHH (facilitator)

[Video](#)

Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) - Deaf & Hard of Hearing Unit (DHHU)

[Website](#)

About the Division of Rehabilitation Services

The Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) provides a variety of services to Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals to help them achieve employment and greater independence. They provide vocational rehabilitation (VR) services such as:

- Career counseling and guidance
- Job training and skills development
- Assistive technology and devices (e.g., hearing aids, alerting systems)
- Job placement services
- College or vocational school funding, if part of the employment goal
- Workplace accommodations and support

Deaf & Hard of Hearing Unit (DHHU)

The establishment of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Unit within Maryland DORS in 2023 was a significant step toward improving services. One of the main reasons was to bring all Deaf/Hard of Hearing Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors under one supervisor for better coordination. But there are several other key reasons why this dedicated unit was formed:

- Previously, services could vary depending on the counselor or region. By creating one centralized unit, DORS aimed to 1) ensure all Deaf and hard of hearing consumers receive consistent, equitable, and culturally competent

services, no matter where they live. 2) Standardize best practices in working with the Deaf and hard of hearing population.

- Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals often face communication and cultural barriers when accessing public services. This unit ensures staff are fluent in ASL or trained to work effectively with Deaf/HH individuals.
- Provides accessible communication and interpreters more seamlessly.
- Prioritizes cultural sensitivity and Deaf awareness in every step of the rehabilitation process.
- Counselors can share resources, strategies, and case management approaches.
- Ongoing training and team meetings focused on unique challenges in the Deaf and hard of hearing VR services.
- Easier to advocate for policy changes and improvements that specifically benefit Deaf and hard of hearing consumers.
- Helps raise awareness and promote Deaf services both internally (within DORS) and externally (to community partners, schools, and employers).
- Develop targeted programs and partnerships (e.g., Deaf internships, transition programs for Deaf youth).
- Better respond to emerging needs in the community (such as technology, education, or employer outreach).

Additionally, the presenters and Director DeBerry discussed the importance of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) programs to support non-native English speakers in developing reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. This is particularly critical for internationally documented Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals—those in the U.S. on student, work, or other valid visas—who may require access to language acquisition, education, and vocational services as they adjust to life in the United States.

DORS typically serves U.S. citizens or permanent residents. Therefore, individuals with valid visa documentation may not automatically qualify for vocational rehabilitation services. However, eligibility is not always strictly limited. DORS may consider providing services if:

1. The individual is actively pursuing permanent residency or citizenship, or
2. The individual is under protected status, such as asylum seekers or refugees.

International Deaf immigrants may require ASL classes as part of their language development, which is essential for:

- Accessing education and employment opportunities,

- Participating in community life, and
- Preparing for the naturalization process.

These individuals would benefit from:

- Accessible civics and U.S. history classes,
- Preparation for the naturalization interview, including the use of ASL interpreters, and
- Support in understanding civil rights, responsibilities, and the structure of U.S. systems.

Recommendations for Workgroup Consideration

After listening to their discussions, it made me wonder if it would be feasible to bring DORS under one umbrella, namely the Maryland Commission on Deaf & Hard-of-Hearing (MCDHH) - a central hub for Deaf/HH policy coordination. Just a few factors to consider:

Advantages:

- Streamlined coordination: Right now, Deaf services are often scattered across agencies (DORS, MSDE, etc.). Centralizing could reduce duplication and confusion for consumers.
- Consistent policies and cultural competence: Deaf and Hard of Hearing people would benefit from unified approaches to access, communication standards, interpreter use, etc.
- Improved advocacy and oversight: MCDHH would have expertise and connections with the Deaf community and could ensure accountability and responsiveness across service areas.

The key state agencies and offices in Maryland, especially those that may intersect with Deaf and Hard of Hearing services, can include both general state departments and specific offices that may provide programs affecting education, health, employment, and accessibility affecting the Deaf/HH.