

State Fiscal Year 2020 Annual Report

NEVADA COMMISSION FOR PERSONS WHO ARE DEAF AND
HARD OF HEARING

KHIANTI THOMAS, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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Executive Summary:

The Commission, over the course of the year, has diligently worked to define their position in the community as a staunch advocate. Despite unprecedented events, the Commission still made strides in learning more about the needs of the community, combating accessibility issues, and gaining the support of legislators to help improve the laws that affect the community.

Due to technological challenges and the adverse impact of COVID-19 the Commission had to postpone additional outreach initiatives to connect with community members. However, this did not detour their commitment in making sure all Nevadans have equal and full access to resources, services, and opportunities in all aspects of community life.

Although the Commission faced some challenges, they also were able to accomplish some big wins for the betterment of the community. Specifically, advocating for the use of interpreters during press conferences, securing a designee to assist with unemployment issues because of COVID-19, and promoting the use of clear masks/shields at state offices to allow for access by people who read lips as part of their communication.

The Commission is looking forward to creating innovative ways to reach the community in a virtual space by conducting virtual workshops, webinars, and partnerships with other stakeholders in efforts to provide a more robust catalog of events and advocacy efforts. The Commission will also focus efforts on education advocacy in the coming year.

Background:

The Nevada Commission for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, was created through SB 481 in the 79th Legislative Session. As a result of the 80th Legislative Session, the Commission was granted a full-time paid Executive Director position to be paid from the Telecommunications Device Surcharge (TDD). The Executive Director position was recruited during state fiscal year and an offer was made in March 2020. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, this Executive Director, Khianti Thomas started on July 27, 2020. The commission currently has two vacancies and is actively recruiting to fill these positions; moreover, the current Chair and Vice chair were elected to continue their duties in their respective roles.

The Commission efforts in state fiscal year 2020 focused on advocacy, particularly in regard to education and language acquisition as well as response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Commission has also participated in a Healthcare Alliance for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, organized by the Office of Minority Health and Equity.

The Commission has also organized into three active subcommittees:

- Legislative Subcommittee – reviewing and prioritizing legislative recommendations in preparation for the 81st session of the legislature.
- Education Subcommittee – continuing efforts to advocate for students in Nevada’s public school system.
- Outreach Subcommittee – developing and implementing plans to connect with deaf, hard of hearing, and speech impaired individuals throughout Nevada.

At the beginning of 2020, the Commission did organize an Employment Subcommittee, focusing on connecting with employers and promoting employability of the deaf and hard of hearing community. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission set aside this subcommittee in order to focus on the above three subcommittees that are priorities for the community.

COVID-19

The unforeseen onset of COVID-19 has delayed many plans the Commission had to elevate their advocacy efforts as outlined in the State Plan. Specifically, with the CDC mandated regulation for social distancing, it has made it difficult for the Commission to actively engage with the community during townhall meetings. Unfortunately, this has perpetuated the very things that have created barriers for the community (i.e. lack of access). These barriers have been highlighted as the Commission moved to virtual meetings, which has had it’s challenges for Commission members and the public. This spiraling event has had a crucial impact on the services, resources, and opportunities the Commission was eager to undertake this year. Because of COVID-19 the Commission was required to redirect their focus and helped support several initiatives:

- *Unemployment Access* – as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of Nevada businesses, the Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation (DETR) experienced an unprecedented surge in unemployment claims. The DETR

system was completely inaccessible by individuals who are Deaf, relying on Relay services to call DETR. The Commission partnered with the Nevada Disability Advocacy Law Center to write a letter to the Director of DETR, explaining the issues with access. As a result, DETR changed business processes to allow for access by the Deaf community.

- *Media and Interpreters* – The many press conferences held by the Governor included sign language interpreters, most often the state sign language interpreters, however news outlets placed banners in front of the interpreters which blocked access for the Deaf community. Additionally, not all news outlets would even broadcast the interpreters. The Commission wrote a letter explaining the critical role the interpreters had in conveying potentially life saving information to the Deaf community. As a result, the Governor's office and news outlets reconfigured the press conferences to ensure the interpreters would be seen on screen at all times.
- *Masks and Accessibility* – Face coverings make it impossible for individuals who read lips to do so. The Commission, working with the Healthcare Alliance, wrote a letter to Caleb Cage, the Nevada Health Response Director explaining the issue with face coverings and offered alternatives, such as clear shields. As a result of this effort, the state of Nevada Department of Administration released an all-state memo requiring state agencies to consider purchasing clear masks/shields to be used by team members when working with an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing.

Strategic Plan:

The strategic plan is the blueprint that aids the efforts of the Commission. This year the Commission has made some updates to the four high level goals. The goals include the following:

Goals:

- Ensure all Nevadan's who are Deaf, Deaf-blind, Hard of Hearing and those with a speech Disability, have access to timely basic services.
- Collaborate with partners to improve infrastructure by advocating for the inclusion of the target population in existing efforts.
- Raise awareness about and support for individuals who are deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing and those with a speech impairment.
- Develop family services and support necessary to adequately care for family members who are deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing and those with a speech disability.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission was able to draft and approve a letter, along with a draft template for a standardized Communication Plan to be included in all IEPs for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and speech impaired students in Nevada. The letter and template was sent to the Nevada Department of Education as a recommendation from the Commission.

The Commission has also been participating in a Healthcare Alliance organized by the Office of Minority Health and Equity. The primary goal of the alliance has been to evaluate the hearing

aid program established in NRS 427A.610 as a result of SB203 in the 80th session. As written, the law allows for very few families to qualify for the program. Additionally, the law does not allow for molds, fittings, or batteries to be covered. These are all items that families struggle to obtain, even before getting a hearing aid.

The Commission is also working with the Department of Education to ensure the Language Acquisition component of SB203 moves forward. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the subcommittee that was created from SB203 was put on hold.

SFY2021 Priorities:

As Nevada continues to feel the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission is working to establish priorities and processes to continue to advocate for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and speech impaired community. For this SFY, the Commission priorities include:

- Legislative Advocacy – focusing on amending the language of the hearing aid program established in NRS 427A.610 to be more accessible and less restrictive to families by including hearing aid molds, fittings, and batteries. By including these items, it will help decrease the financial burden families may incur based on the current law.
- Continue to identify gaps in service to address community needs.
- Determine innovative ways to complete outreach to the community
- Increase advocacy in Legislation, Healthcare, Employment and Education