

Katie Hobbs
Governor



Nikki Soukup
Interim Director

Arizona Commission

for the deaf and the hard of hearing

100 N 15th Avenue □ Suite 104 □ Phoenix, AZ 85007
acdhh.org

**Minutes from the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the
Hard of Hearing, Special Board Meeting.
Meeting held August 14th, 2025 at 4:30 pm.
The meeting was held via Zoom Teleconference.**

Call to Order & Roll Call

Commissioner Sienko called the meeting to order at 4:32 PM.

Commissioners present: Sarah Bolmarcich, Andrew Cohen, Diana Herron, Randal Kidd, Scott Madsen, Jennifer Scarboro, Catherine Sienko, Lisa Swenson, Debbie Venkatesh

Commissioners absent: Virginia Thompson, Fred Williams, Melanie O'Rourke, Harvey Goodstein

AAG: Elise Phalen

ADOA Representatives: George Mcneely, Brian Westerberg

Staff Present: Nikki Soukup, Carmen Green Smith, Laricsa Herrera, Chyla Dalton-Nava

Approval of Minutes- May 15th Meeting

Commissioner Bolmarcich moved to approve the minutes from the May 15th, 2025 meeting, seconded by Commissioner Herron. The motion passed unanimously.

Chair's Report

None.

Interim Director's Report

Nikki Soukup began her report by announcing the State budget passed, which increases the agency's FY '26 appropriation from \$4.8M to \$5M. SSP program funding rose significantly, from \$192K to \$350K (an 82% increase), enabling expanded services for DeafBlind individuals across Arizona. This achievement was possible due to community engagement with legislators, and she extended thanks to Senator Kavanagh for his crucial support with the funding increase.

She went on to explain that ACDHH is moving its website from .org to AZ.gov for security and state branding alignment, offering long-term benefits. The new site aims for full accessibility and easy navigation, with positive feedback received on the new branding both from internal staff, as well as community members. ACDHH has completed the RFP

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The mission of the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing is to ensure, in partnership with the public and private sectors, accessibility for the deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing, and persons with speech difficulties to improve their quality of life.

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for statewide relay service and renewed our contract with T-Mobile. A key new feature, Real-Time Text (RTT), starts in January and will also be available for DeafBlind individuals (more details to follow).

ACDHH has participated in several significant events this quarter, including the DANE Heart of the Community event, where I (Nikki) was honored with the Heart of the Community award. Other conferences and retreats we attended include the African American Conference on Disabilities, the Hearing Loss Association National Conference, the World Elder Abuse Awareness Day Conference, the DeafBlind Retreat of Arizona (DBRAZ), the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf National Conference, the Deaf Seniors of America (DSA) Conference, and the National Association of Agencies Serving Deaf and Hard of Hearing Summit.(NASADHH).

The ACDHH Interpreter Launch Pad project, which includes a cohort of 26 participants, encompassing both mentors and mentees, has successfully launched. Participants are already applying new skills in the community, and Arizona interpreting agencies strongly support this initiative; more details at the November meeting.

In personnel news, Sue Kay Kneifel retired from her dedicated service to the State of Arizona on July 4th. We extend our sincere gratitude for her many years of exceptional service and unwavering commitment to individuals who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind in Arizona.

Public Comments

None.

Executive Director Search Update

Brian and George from ADOA provided the board with an update on the executive director search process. ADOA has received a total of 69 applications, which were then filtered down to 31. This provides a strong pool of candidates to choose from. All 31 applications have been forwarded to the ACDHH Search Committee.

Commissioner Bolmarcich asked for clarification on the process of how ADOA narrowed down the initial applicant pool to 31 candidates. George explained that candidates are screened based on KSAs, job responsibilities, and work history (longevity/stability). After basic qualification review, a larger pool is forwarded for multiple perspectives, typically with a 50% screening rate (higher for specialized roles). A large sample was sent to the Board. One candidate withdrew, and two failed eligibility screening (standard legal questions).

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George emphasized that the initiative is the board's, and ADOA is here to offer full support, and they are committed to moving swiftly in the coming months to identify and advance the primary candidate. Commissioner Herron added that the next meeting of the Search Committee will take place on August 25th, and the committee will discuss reducing the pool and scheduling interviews.

Communication Access in Health Facilities

Commissioner Scarboro raised concerns about communication access in long-term healthcare facilities for elderly Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, who face significant isolation risks. She requests the Commission focus on this issue, seeking an update on staff efforts to assist Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind seniors and their families. Given Arizona's aging population, she questions if this critical issue, currently outside the strategic plan, will be addressed by the Commission or another agency, and asks for staff discussions, details, and a plan in a report or further discussion. Nikki Soukup followed up by explaining that staff are able to provide the board with information regarding our activities and our focus on older adults, who are a vital part of our strategic plan. The ACDHH strategic plan specifically addresses two vulnerable populations: those in rural areas and older adults. She welcomed the Board's insights and feedback to help the agency determine priorities for both our organization and the community. She also informed the Board that details about our past actions, current initiatives, and future plans can be shared before the next board meeting.

Improving Outcomes for Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind Young Adults

Commissioner Sienko asked Commissioner Kidd to discuss his suggested agenda item on Improving Outcomes for Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind Young Adults.

Commissioner Kidd moved that this agenda item could be tabled until the next meeting; Commissioner Herron seconds the motion, the motion carries unanimously.

ASDB Forensic Audit

Nikki Soukup emphasized the ACDHH representative's crucial role on the ASDB board for accountability and conveying concerns. Commissioner Herron can also relay concerns to the board. She also explained that ACDHH is an independent agency with its own

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legislative priorities, primarily funded by the declining telecommunications fund for the Deaf. She also explained that when engaging with stakeholders, it's vital to distinguish between ACDHH and ASDB to avoid confusion and carefully consider the implications of direct advocacy for ASDB. Maintaining separation is key. ACDHH supports ASDB but does not directly lobby for them. With sunset audits approaching (ACDHH 2028, ASDB 2027), we're assessing desirable overlap, focusing on information sharing and comparable services.

The current effective approach is working through our ASDB representative. Commissioner Scarboro provided clarification on the audits taking place and explained that ASDB is currently undergoing two concurrent audits: a forensics audit and a performance audit. The forensics audit, conducted by ADOA, primarily examines the agency's operations and financing. The performance audit, on the other hand, is reviewing our educational program, campuses, and services provided to students from birth to 22. While there's some slight overlap, the information for each audit is largely separate. Many people are unaware that these two distinct audits are happening simultaneously. A discussion followed. Nikki Soukup explained how the agency could possibly support ASDB-the agency is able to rally the community and work behind the scenes. For example, not too long ago when there were the issues with Senator Hoffman and a couple others at the most recent sunset review, ACDHH posted information about the Senate Bill on social media to inform the community and encourage their support. We will continue these efforts whenever there's an obvious threat, ensuring we come together with the community.

Future Agenda Items

Commissioner Kidd would like to discuss the agenda item tabled this evening: Improving Outcomes for Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind Young Adults. Commissioner Scarboro would like an update on the Executive Director Search. Chair Sienko encouraged commissioners to reach out if they had any additional agenda items to add.

Adjournment

Commissioner Sienko moved to adjourn the meeting at 5:30 PM; Commissioners Cohen and Scarboro second, the meeting was adjourned at 5:30 PM.

19th day of August, 2025 at 5:00 pm by Chyla Dalton-Nava, Assistant to the Executive Director.