

Minutes of the meeting of the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing, Search Committee.

Meeting held November 6th, 2025 at 4:30pm.

Meeting was held remotely via Zoom and posted to the agency YouTube page.

Call to Order & Roll Call

Commissioner Sienko called the meeting to order at **4:34 AM**

Commissioners present via Zoom: Commissioner Cohen, Commissioner Goodstein, Commissioner Kidd, Commissioner Herron, Commissioner Madsen, Commissioner Scarboro, Commissioner Sienko, Commissioner Swenson

Commissioners absent: Bolmarcich, Venkatesh, Williams

Staff Present via Zoom: Nikki Soukup, Carmen Green, Lillian Gilmer, Victoria Vaughn, Ricky Gonsowski, Chyla Dalton-Nava

AAG: Elise Phalen

Approval of Minutes, August 14th 2025

Commissioner Herron moved to approve the minutes from the August 14th Quarterly Board Meeting; Commissioner Kidd seconded the motion, the motion carried unanimously.

Chair's Report/Summary of Events

None.

Interim Director's Report

Nikki's report covered several key areas, beginning with the acknowledgment of Commissioner Melanie O'Rourke's resignation, and her five years of service to the ACDHH Board of Commissioners. She highlighted the ongoing search for a new hard-of-hearing board representative. Agency updates include completing FY '26 strategic plan objectives, executing a rebranding initiative, and transitioning the agency website to a secure .gov platform. The legislative focus will prioritize securing stable funding for the telecommunication fund for the Deaf due to the decline in landline use, and plans are underway for the annual Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind Advocacy Day at the Capitol in early February. Recent achievements include a successful "Experience Our World" simulation with the City of Phoenix and the second "Community Consortium" meeting. Support Service Provider expansion for DeafBlind Consumers

saw contracts awarded to both the existing provider, Catholic Community Services (CCS), and a new vendor, Vancro. Finally, in personnel news, Reena Banerjee was appointed to the Phoenix Police Chief's Cross Disability Advisory Board, and Lillian Gilmer joined as the new Director of Business Operations. Lillian Gilmer, the new Director of Business Operations, introduced herself, noting she is a native Arizonan with five weeks on the job. She brings 20 years of experience, mainly in project management, finance/budget oversight, and operations leadership in both public and private sectors. Her primary focus is "operational excellence," which involves improving efficiency and being a good steward of funds. Her role encompasses Finance and Operations (including IT, payroll, and procurement), ensuring responsible and ethical resource use, and building a robust operational foundation to support the Commission's mission and strategic plan. She expressed gratitude and looks forward to working with the Board. The commissioners had follow up questions, and a discussion ensued.

Executive Director Search Update

Chair Sienko updated the board on the current progress of the search process. The agency started with six candidates for the leadership position, two of whom withdrew, leaving four finalists. The initial interviews were successful, showing the candidates' passion for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind, and Deaf disabled communities. The next step is a second, final round of interviews on December 3rd, which will include a public presentation. A special board meeting for the interviews will start at 4:30 PM and is open to the public. The Board will also meet for a training session before the interviews and then go into Executive Session afterward. The following day, December 4th, the Board will meet again in the morning to select the final candidate. The speaker also mentioned needing to discuss the recommended finalists, which may require a motion to enter executive session. **Commissioner Herron moved to go into executive session to discuss the finalists; Commissioner Kidd seconds, the board moved into executive session at 5:00 PM. The board returned from closed session at 5:38 PM.** Due to unspecified reasons, they were unable to discuss internal candidates and will need to schedule a special board meeting for that purpose. Chair Sienko will contact Chyla to arrange the meeting.

Alyssa Barlow-Agency Appeal

Victoria Vaughn summarized the appeal for ASL interpreter Alyssa Barlow. Ms. Barlow's license renewal was denied because she did not resolve noted deficiencies in a timely manner. Ms. Barlow is appealing this denial. The Board must be informed of the appeal and needs to appoint an ACDHH staff representative for the appeal hearing. A discussion followed. **Commissioner Kidd moved to go into closed session at 5:44 PM; Commissioner Herron seconded the motion, the board moved into closed session at 5:44 PM. The board returned at 6:08 PM.** Chair Sienko reported that during their discussion on the Alyssa Barlow case, it was determined that it is their responsibility to designate an individual from the ACDHH staff to handle the complaint with the agency's AAG, Elise Phalen. This staff member will be authorized to manage the settlement process and finalize the settlement terms. The board discussed possible candidates within the agency. **Commissioner Thompson moved that Carmen Smith be appointed to serve as the agency representative in the Alyssa Barlow case; Commissioner Herron seconded the motion, the motion carried unanimously.**

The Board took a break at 6:12 PM

The Board returned at 6:25 PM.

Quorum was re-established by roll call.

Communication Access in Health Care Facilities- Lori Johnson

Lori Johnson shared significant concerns regarding communication access for Deaf patients in Arizona healthcare facilities, drawing on her parents' challenging personal experiences. She described systemic failures in hospitals and skilled nursing facilities to provide adequate communication. A key issue involved her father being denied placement by approximately 80 skilled nursing facilities in the Phoenix metro area, an inability to place him that Lori attributes to his Deafness. He was eventually placed weeks later in a facility without her input on its suitability. Lori believes this continuous struggle for access contributed to his decline and depression. A subsequent incident occurred during a hospital stay where he was administered Fentanyl without an interpreter present to ensure informed consent, which she suggests contributed to his death. Lori also recounted experiences with her mother, who had dementia and was consistently denied necessary on-site interpreting services despite Lori's persistent demands. This lack of communication led to a crisis where her mother was nearly intubated due to fear and confusion, which was only resolved after Lori intervened to calm her down. Furthermore, the hospital scheduled an unlicensed, uncertified interpreter for long shifts with her mother. To improve healthcare access for Deaf individuals in Arizona, Lori proposed several key improvements: Medical Training;

Develop partnerships and advisory roles with medical schools to train doctors and nurses on best practices for communicating with Deaf patients. Agency Oversight: Implement agency oversight to compel interpreting agencies to coordinate effectively. Central Registry/Coordination: Create a central registry or coordinated effort for medical facilities to easily locate available, qualified medical interpreters.

Quorum was lost at 6:55 PM.

Chair Sienko and Commissioner Herron thanked Lori Johnson for her impactful and passionate presentation detailing areas for improvement in communication access. They acknowledged the emotional nature of the topic, affirmed that Lori's story made a difference, and committed to moving forward with the issue. Chair Sienko, who is also the president of the Arizona Association of the Deaf (AZAD), suggests an offline conversation with Lori to discuss how AZAD and ACDHH can partner to find a resolution. Chair Sienko was forced to end the meeting due to a lack of quorum after several individuals left early. She expressed frustration that unfinished work is consistently leading to heavier agendas and that Board members are expected to stay for the entire scheduled duration. She emphasized that anyone unable to participate fully must inform her and Chyla beforehand, especially for logistics involving interpreters and CART. A special meeting will need to be scheduled, and she expects full attendance, reminding members that their gubernatorial appointment is a significant civil duty that requires honoring their commitment to the people they serve. Since a quorum was lost, she could not accept any further comments and called for a motion to adjourn.

Adjournment

Commissioner Kidd moved to adjourn at 6:59 PM; Commissioner Herron seconded the motion, the meeting concluded at 6:59 PM.

Posted this 13th day of November, 2025 at 12:00 pm by Chyla Dalton-Nava, Assistant to the Executive Director.