



NCDHH
Nebraska Commission
for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Communication • Advocacy • Equal Access

Pete Ricketts
Governor

October 4, 2021

Candice Arteaga
Chairperson of the Board
Greenwood

Senator John Stinner
Nebraska State Capitol
Room 1004
Lincoln, NE 68509

Robert Feit
Vice Chair
Lincoln

RE: LR 178/LR 179 NCDHH comments on need for Federal American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 funds to enhance communication access for Nebraskans who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Frances Beurivage
Secretary
Lincoln

Dear Senator Stinner and Members of the Appropriations Committee:

Jeremy Fitzpatrick
Board Member
Omaha

As an independent state agency, the mission of the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NCDHH) is to promote and advocate for Nebraskans who are Deaf, DeafBlind or Hard of Hearing, including enhancement and monitoring access to effective communication and telecommunication technology. In Nebraska, approximately 20% of the population has some degree of hearing loss, and 1% of the population is deaf.

Jonathan Scherling
Board Member
Omaha

On behalf of the NCDHH Full Board, I would like to thank Senator Wishart for offering our agency the opportunity to testify and provide written comments to the Legislative Appropriations Committee. The purpose of our written comments and testimony is to provide members of the Appropriations Committee examples of how a small investment of the American Rescue Plan Act funds can significantly improve communication access for Nebraskans who are Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing.

Diane Schutt
Board Member
Fairbury

NCDHH recommends American Rescue Plan Act funds be used to address four key focus areas. The four areas are as follows:

Dr. Joshua Sevier
Board Member
Omaha

Enhanced Investment to Build High Speed Broadband Services

Sandra Shaw
Board Member
Seward

NCDHH strongly supports funding the extensive enhancement of and access to statewide high-speed broadband. This investment will greatly improve effective communication access for Nebraskans who are Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing.

Vali Hitz
Board Member
Raymond

1. This investment will greatly benefit hospitals, medical facilities and schools in the provision of “real-time, full-motion video and audio over a dedicated high-speed, wide-bandwidth video connection or wireless connection that delivers high-quality video images that do not produce lags, choppy, blurry, or grainy images, or irregular pauses in communication” (ADA requirements for provision of effective communication in Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) settings). VRI can be especially useful in rural areas where on-site interpreters may be difficult to obtain. Additionally, there may be some cost advantages in using VRI in certain circumstances.

John Wyvill
Executive Director
john.wyvill@nebraska.gov

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Investment in a Five-Year Bridge Program as State Builds Broadband Infrastructure

2. A bridge for addressing infrastructure needs in the interim would be to set aside funds for the next five years to create a subscription based mobile communication app giving subscribers access to American Sign Language video intérpreters for the Deaf, automated captioning for the hard of hearing, and spoken video assistance for the blind. This app would also fill gaps in communication access in situations that are not covered under the ADA, such as communication interactions while shopping in a store or talking with a bank teller. Access to these types of programs is oftentimes a means for greater economic independence. The ability to interact with others creates better neighbors and contributing members of a community. Funding this app puts this technology into the hands of the economically disadvantaged. NCDHH recommends the Nebraska Public Service Commission be responsible for the creation, implementation and maintenance of this five-year program.

Creation of a Communication Access Fund Administered by the Nebraska Department of Education to Support Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Local Schools

3. The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) should be provided funds to address the specific equipment and service needs of students who are deaf and hard of hearing.
 - a. Establish an equipment fund for schools to purchase specialized equipment for eligible students who are deaf and hard of hearing.
 - b. Establish a service fund for schools to support other needed auxiliary services for students who are deaf and hard of hearing such as captioning, note-takers, and sign language interpreters.
 - c. Provide funds to support enhanced training and mentoring for educational interpreters to improve their EIPA certification levels.


Rural Initiative Fund to Support In-Person Communication Access

4. A supplemental, wrap-around fund to support costs relating to non-ADA interpreting situations in rural areas of Nebraska. This would provide financial assistance related to interpreting costs for needs that fall outside of the ADA effective communication guidelines. The fund would assist with costs associated with providing an interpreter for those entities not required to provide an interpreter or auxiliary aid or device under title III of the ADA and would not cover any employment situations. Requests would be for non-profit agencies, membership based organizations, private youth organizations that are outside the oversight of schools, religious functions or any other form of non-ADA interpreting situations.

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Thank you for allowing NCDHH the opportunity to share identified needs in our community that can be addressed by the American Rescue Funds. If you need more information, please don't hesitate to have members of your team contact me at john.wyvill@nebraska.gov or 402-471-3593.

Sincerely,



John C. Wyvill
Executive Director

cc: Governor Pete Ricketts
Maureen Nickels, Board President, Nebraska Department of Education
Matt Blomstedt, Nebraska Commissioner of Education
Tim Schramm, Nebraska Public Service Commission
Candice Arteaga, Omaha Association of the Deaf
Jonathan Arteaga, Nebraska Association of the Deaf
Tina Work, Nebraska Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf
Linsay Darnall Jr., Junior Nebraska Association of the Deaf
Peggy Scherling, Lincoln Association of the Deaf
Arva Herman, Hearing Loss Association of America – Omaha
Steve Stovall, Nebraska Public Service Commission
Sue Czaplewski, Nebraska Regional Program
Shelli Janning, Nebraska Hands and Voices