NC Department of Health and Human Services
Division of Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Communication Equity for Older Adults

NC Coalition on Aging Monthly Meeting
Jan Withers, Division Director

March 22, 2024
Why It Matters To North Carolinians

• North Carolina in 2019
  - State’s total population 10.49 Million
  - Black 2.25 Million
  - Hispanic/Latino 1.02 Million
  - Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind 1.20 Million

  • 33% growth rate until 2030 = 1.60 Million
  • 21% growth rate for general population

• Age groups with hearing loss
  - 18-64 16.2% Population
  - 65-74 30% Population
  - 75+ 50% Population
Why It Matters

Special populations and considerations

• Military Veterans
  – Hearing loss is the leading combat-related disability, with 60% of returning veterans experiencing hearing loss and/or tinnitus.

• Older Adults
  – Hearing loss is the third most chronic treatable health condition among older adults, after arthritis and hypertension.
  – Comorbidity: Diabetes, dementia, falls
Why It Matters

• A hidden disability that is often overlooked or misunderstood

• The Goal: Effective Communication
  – It’s a Simple Goal!
  – Achieving it is Complicated!

Deaf
• Most born deaf or became deaf prior to spoken language development.
• Primarily uses ASL

Hard of Hearing
• Most lose their hearing later in life and do not know ASL
• Some born hard of hearing or gradually lose hearing over time.

DeafBlind
• Various degrees of hearing and visual loss
• Communication methods will vary significantly depending on the onset, level, and type of hearing and vision loss
Delays in Addressing Hearing Loss

7-year delay for the average adult
- Unaware of link between adult-onset hearing loss and overall health
- Hearing loss denial
- High cost of hearing aids
- Lack of access to information

Longer delays for veterans
- Stigma magnified by military culture

Slow boil effect
- It’s invisible and painless, therefore-
- “I’ll deal with it later,” but later never comes
- Poor self-advocacy skills

SOURCE: Quick Statistics About Hearing, March 2021

Over 90% of people with adult-onset hearing loss could benefit from hearing aids, but only 16% actually use them.
What are the Consequences?

The Impacts of Hearing Loss

Financial

Relationships

Self-Esteem

Socialization

Health Implications

Independence

Quality of Life

Mental Health
Health Comorbidities

Strong Correlation between hearing loss and...

- Dementia
- Diabetes
- Depression and anxiety
- Falls

Dementia

- *Mild* hearing loss = 2x risk
- *Moderate* = 3x risk
- *Severe* = 5x risk

Falls

- Mild hearing loss = 3x risk
- For each 10dB of hearing loss multiplies risk 1.4 fold

Depression

- Increased risk of suicide among service members and veterans

SOURCE: The Hidden Risks of Hearing Loss, Johns Hopkins, 2021; Hearing Loss and Falls Among Older Adults in the US; Differences Between Veteran Suicides With and Without Psychiatric Symptoms, March 2012
The Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind Experience

When Communication Barriers Persist:

- Hypervigilance
- Advocacy Exhaustion
- Distrust of System
Communication Equity is Health Equity

- Hearing loss is the 3\textsuperscript{rd} most common treatable condition after arthritis and hypertension.

- If we focus on hearing loss, then we can address arthritis, hypertension and other health issues.

Communication equity = Health equity
Two Major Barriers

1. Many Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind people lack the knowledge and resources to effectively advocate for themselves, especially for accessible communication, in all areas of their lives.

2. Service providers lack the knowledge and resources to ensure Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind people have the same access to their services and resources as the general population.
Hearing Loss Solutions

Hearing Healthcare
- Hearing aids
- Cochlear implants

Daily Coping Skills and Tools
- Psychosocial
- Communication
- Assistive technology
- Self-Advocacy

Support groups
- Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA)
- Potential for other support groups
Who Is At Your Table?
Key to Systems Change
Systems Change

Historical Focus
• Direct services and local training and consultation

Systems Change
• Build capacity through partnership with State agencies and organizations
NC Division of Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DSDHH)

We are NOT a stand-alone agency that duplicates the services of other agencies and organizations.

Technical assistance such as training and consultation on policy, cases, and best practices for staff, including decision-makers and front-line workers.

No charge for our services.

Scan your phone to access our website.

http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dsdhh
Effective Partnership

- Top-down systems-oriented approach
- Agency or Organization Structure?
- Key Point of Contact?
- Broader Infrastructure: “Push it Out”
- Mutual Leveraging of Resources
- State Aging Plan
Communication, the human connection, is the key to personal and career success.

- Paul J. Meyer
Contact Us

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