

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**

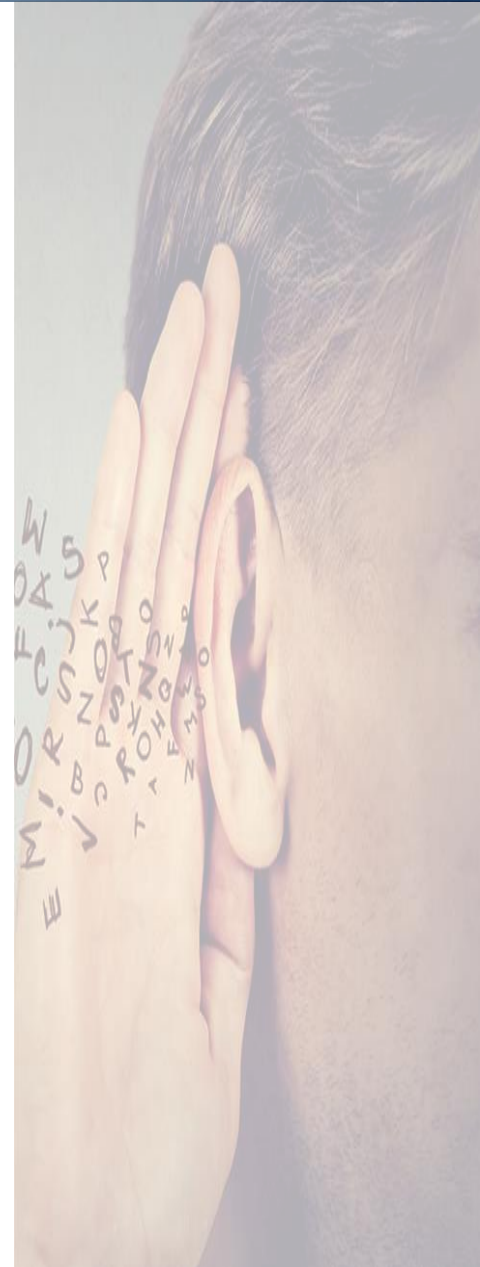
- **18-64 16.2% Population**
- **65-74 30% Population**
- **75+ 50% Population**



# 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

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

SOURCE: [Quick Statistics About Hearing, March 2021](#)

# What are the Consequences?

## The Impacts of Hearing Loss



# 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<sup>rd</sup> most common treatable condition after arthritis and hypertension.



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



# **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

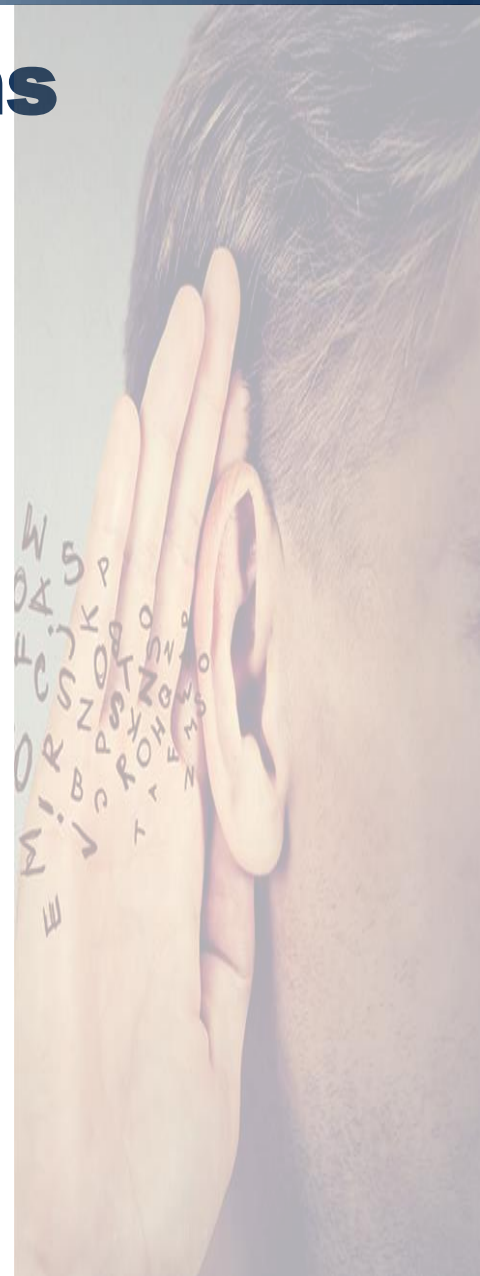
- Hearing aids
- Cochlear implants

## Daily Coping Skills and Tools

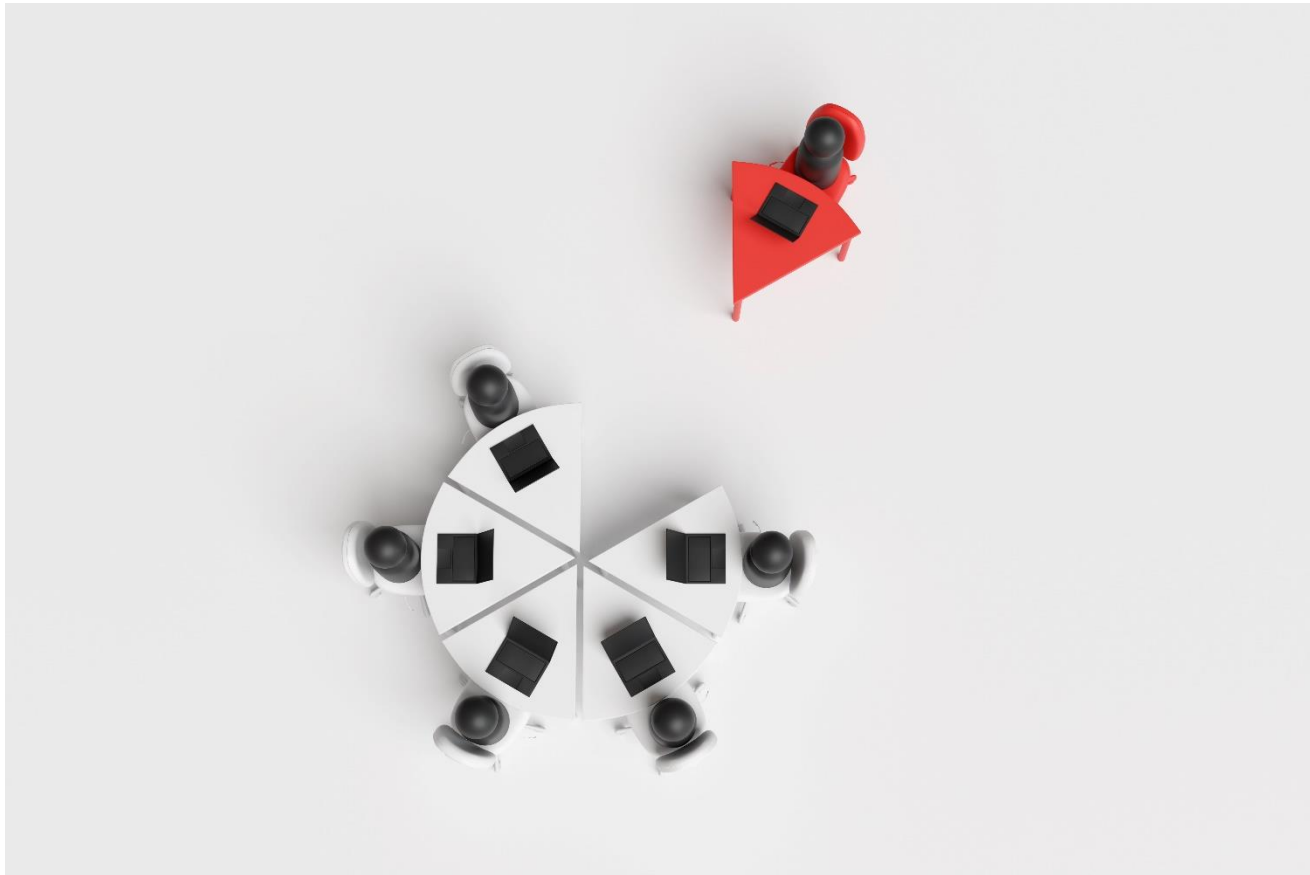
- Psychosocial
- Communication
- Assistive technology
- Self-Advocacy

## 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



# 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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