

[An ASL version of this letter is available here.](#)



October 25, 2021

Dear Partners,

Since the start of our new project, we have been honored to support Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and DeafBlind (DHHDB) students, families, and school personnel.

We are writing in response to some serious concerns raised by members of the Vermont community.

Our scope of work is to provide consultation and training to educators, related services providers, and families to build capacity for DHHDB student success in communication and language, individualized educational outcomes, and transition to adulthood.

Two months into the school year, we are supporting 360 students across 43 districts, providing an array of services tailored to students' individualized needs, goals, communication, and language choices.

We are receiving positive feedback about our team's work, and we know there are serious concerns about whether DHHDB students – and students who use ASL, Cued speech, and bilingual ASL and English -- are receiving the supports they need and deserve.

[A letter dated October 8, 2021](#), sent to the Vermont Agency of Education, expressed concerns about this new project, along with some misconceptions about us and our work.

We try to address those here, and believe it is most valuable to meet and work together. We share many of the same goals, and most importantly want DHHDB students to receive quality services and thrive.

Our Team

One of the concerns raised is whether our team is qualified to provide services to DHHDB students.

We have formed a team of Teachers for Students Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (TFSDHH), educational audiologists, education access consultants, an ASL/Bilingual Education Consultant, and a Speech-Language Pathologist to guide this work. Half of our team is conversationally fluent in ASL.

Further, our team is committed to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Education Guidelines referenced in the letter (National Association of State Directors of Special Education [NASDSE], 2018, [*Principles of Optimizing Outcomes for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing*](#)). We strive to achieve these principles in our own practice and build the capacity of schools to implement them as well. And we are expanding data collection to measure progress consistent with these guidelines.

As a program fully housed at the University of Vermont (UVM), we are excited to have the support of and resources available to a world-class research university. As a program in UVM's College of Education and Social Services (CESS), we are likewise supported by innovative and equity-driven educational researchers and instructors who support our work. And as part of the UVM Center on Disability & Community Inclusion (CDCI), we benefit from CDCI's administrative oversight and infrastructure, as well as being grounded in principles of inclusion for all people with disabilities.

Our Services

Concerns were raised about the scope of work our services cover. Specifically, the letter states that we cut direct instruction and "services for students who use American Sign Language (ASL), Cued Speech, other means of communication and/or bilingual (ASL/English)" (p.2).

We have not cut services, and this is an understandable misconception.

The primary goal of our scope of work is to provide consultation and training to increase school teams' capacity to identify and meet the needs of DHHDB students. The services include both ASL and audiological services. ([A full menu of the services we offer can be found on our website.](#))

We also offer direct instruction in ASL and direct instruction on self-advocacy skill development and hearing assistive technology use. This is part of our consultative services, and our schools have shared they are receiving the same services from their educational consultant as they have in the past.

What is beyond our scope of work is providing all direct instruction and intensive services for DHHDB students. Those services have historically been provided by direct

school hires, or contracted providers through Nine East Network, that ended when their organization abruptly closed. In response, we expanded our services and increased our focus on coordinating with other providers.

As we provide consultation to teams in schools, we directly recognize and respect each student's choice, with the support of their family, of communication modality.

Our services deliberately do not seek to privilege students who use listening or spoken language over students who sign or use Cued Speech or are bilingual in ASL and English. Our services support schools in providing communication supports as determined by the educational team in collaboration with the student and their family.

Our Commitment to Inclusion and Conversation

No static document such as this can respond fully to all concerns, either within the letter of October 8th or beyond it. Since July, we have worked hard to respond to all questions and concerns shared with us. We have attended meetings, shared updated information, and coordinated with other service providers to clarify the continuum of DHHDB services in Vermont.

We welcome concerned families, educators, practitioners, students, and community leaders in the Vermont DHHDB community to engage with us directly, and continually.

- You can reach project personnel by email at dhhdb@uvm.edu
- You can contact Jesse Suter, Director of the UVM Center on Disability and Community Inclusion (CDCI), at jesse.suter@uvm.edu
- You can also find additional information about our project at go.uvm.edu/dhhdb
- We also invite participation in our ongoing advisory committee.

We look forward to receiving additional feedback, and to working with all of Vermont's DHHDB community on increasing access and support for individual communication choices for DHHDB students in schools.

Warmly,

Jesse Suter, Director, UVM Center on Disability & Community Inclusion

Margaret Overman, Project Co-Coordinator

Darren McIntyre, Project Co-Coordinator