

# Missouri Communicator

Missouri Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing  
Spring 2016 Edition: Exploring Missouri's Deaf World



MCDHH works with individuals, service providers, businesses, organizations, and state agencies to improve the lives and opportunities of all Missourians with hearing loss.

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## Serious Issues Call for Serious and Deliberate Action

*Opeoluwa Sotonwa, MCDHH Executive Director*

As the Missouri Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, we're often called upon to help navigate the world of deafness. Our name tells people we work on issues related to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. We are contacted with questions ranging from communication access to interpreting, legal issues to education, and what to do about getting help for someone they know who is deaf.

For people outside of the Deaf world, we represent deafness. Without exposure to Deaf world, they see it as a simple issue: without the ability to hear, you can't speak, and therefore you require assistance in order to participate in the broader hearing world. This in turn leaves many Deaf people unable to participate in activities with hearing people.

That is the mistaken perception that many have of the Deaf World. But our world is much broader than this, ranging from the Deaf, to people who are Hard of Hearing, to those who are Deaf-blind, and a variety of cultures within and between. There are many sub-cultures that operate under what is commonly thought of as the Deaf population.

Our job at MCDHH is to advocate for public policies, regulations, and programs to improve the quality and coordination of existing services for individuals with hearing loss, and to promote new services whenever necessary. Our best estimates indicate that there are over 600,000 Deaf and Hard of Hearing people in Missouri.

Despite the large population of people with hearing difficulty, Missouri is one of the few states where...

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## Meet Our Commissioners

**Donna G. Schreiner, Chair**

*Seat for Deaf or Hard of Hearing Member*

**Mary E. Hale, Vice Chair**

*Seat for Deaf or Hard of Hearing Member*

**Paul Blicharz**

*Seat for Deaf or Hard of Hearing Organizations*

**Owen Vandavelde**

*Seat for Parent of a Deaf or Hard of Hearing Child*

**Wendy Jensen**

*Seat for Local Public School Administration*

**Shelly Jones**

*Seat for Representative for Interpreters*

**Ernest Garrett, III**

*Seat for DESE or MSD*

## Meet Our Staff

**Opeoluwa Sotonwa**

*Executive Director*

**Dee Sanfilippo**

*MICS Coordinator*

**Jessica Brown**

*Interpreter Certification Specialist*

**Christopher Ludvigsen**

*Community Support Liaison*

**Emily Fry**

*Information Program Specialist*

**Crystal Anderson**

*Staff Interpreter*

**Laurie Lister**

*Office Support Specialist*



**Opeoluwa Sotonwa with Missouri House Speaker Todd Richardson after a meeting discussing upcoming legislation to benefit Deaf and Hard of Hearing Missourians**

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...private insurance companies are allowed to deny insurance coverage for hearing aids. It is also difficult for many Hard of Hearing people to secure a job as a result of their inability to afford hearing aids. Around the state, emergency sirens designed to alert citizens to natural disasters are inaccessible to those with hearing loss. I have heard so many hyperbolic claims about creating opportunities for Deaf people to become employed but not enough has been done to truly create such an atmosphere throughout our state.

At MCDHH, we develop collaborative partnerships to create a variety of new opportunities for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Missourians. We've recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Missouri Sheriffs'

Association to promote effective communication and cultural understanding between law enforcement and Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. As a result of this partnership we have made an instructional video for citizens and are developing workshops for officers around the state. We've also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Missouri Commission on Human Rights to provide technical assistance that will make their services more accessible to American Sign Language users. In November, we collaborated with other organizations and agencies to host the first ever Cross-Disability Policy Summit in Missouri where we discussed issues that impact all of our communities.

On the legislative front, we've worked with lawmakers to reintroduce HB 469 (now known as HB 1696) that will enable MCDHH to provide grants for organizations that provide support services to Deaf-Blind people in Missouri. We're also working with lawmakers to pass HB 1904, a bill that will change the laws regarding 911 emergency communication services, establish the Missouri 911 Service Trust Fund, and ensure primary access and texting to 911 services. All of these initiatives serve Missouri's Deaf population, but there is so much more that needs to be done. The issues that remain call for serious and deliberate action. We cannot wait any longer.

The challenges with inequality we face in Missouri are real. We can never become passive in our work to fight discrimination and inequality, regardless of where it shows up. Our efforts to embrace diversity are not about doing the right thing just because it is "politically correct." We embrace and champion diversity because it makes us stronger. It makes us better prepared to serve our rapidly-changing communities. These issues combine to create tension in the community, which may be overwhelming. But if we face these challenges as a community, it can help us unleash our best thinking and boldest action. Communication barriers can be detrimental to one's confidence – I say this from experience, I have lived with it as a late-deafened person from an African country.

And so, learning to make Missouri an inclusive community where people with hearing loss feel connected is not just an option, but a necessity. Embracing differences has become a prerequisite for success. We respond to uncertainty by creating new ways of doing things. This is a time for all of us at the head of organizations and businesses to bring all these issues that continue to undermine equal opportunities for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people to the forefront of Missouri dialogue. I see this as an opportunity for us at MCDHH to continue to work collaboratively with Missouri lawmakers and other allies to advance key legislation in 2016.

Therefore, I challenge you to join us at the table for serious conversation to make Missouri an exceptional place which embraces a broad spectrum of possibilities for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Missourians. Choosing to work together is not an option; it is an imperative. Collaboration brings people together to find creative solutions to the innumerable problems that confront our world including our differences. Collaboration is challenging conventional wisdom and creating a community that is an oasis of great ideas and inspiring our stakeholders, communities, and the world. Collaboration will demand that each of us lead from where we are.

I will end this piece with an African saying: "In this world, if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, then we must go together." The challenges we face may be daunting, but they are not insurmountable. We may not be able to change the world individually, but together we can. Let's take our chances. *Remember, we are stronger when we speak with one accord; we are mightier when we work in unity!*





# HB 1696 BASICS

An **SSP** is a **SUPPORT SERVICE PROVIDER** for Deaf-Blind Individuals

*[BONUS FACT: The term “Deaf-Blind” refers to any combination of severe hearing and vision loss]*

**An SSP helps with...**



Getting to Work



Shopping



Visual Info



Other Transportation



Deaf-Blind people to their environment

**Without an SSP, A Deaf-Blind Person May Become**



**ISOLATED  
STUCK AT HOME  
UNABLE TO WORK**

## *How will HB 1696 help?*

HB 1696 will provide grants for **training and certification** of new SSPs and will help offset the costs to organizations that provide support services to Deaf-Blind persons. This will not only make SSPs **employable**, but will help Deaf-Blind individuals to be successful in their **independent lives** and in the **workplace**.

## *How can I help?*

- Contact your representative and let them know why you support HB 1696
  - Change your Facebook profile photo to show “MO Needs SSPs.” Find the graphic on MCDHH’s Facebook
  - Attend the January 26th hearing and offer testimony.
- For information: [mcdhh.mo.gov/upcoming-hearing-for-ssp-bill-hb-1696/](http://mcdhh.mo.gov/upcoming-hearing-for-ssp-bill-hb-1696/)



## Behind the Scenes of the Legislative Session



*Laurie Lister, MCDHH Office Support Specialist*

As we gear up for the 2016 legislative session, there are many behind-the-scenes activities happening at MCDHH. We strive to create new programs to help Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals and provide as much information to our representatives and senators as possible. As the Office Support Specialist, I spend the first few days of opening session contacting targeted representatives as well as other key politicians to arrange one-on-one meetings with our Executive Director, Opeoluwa Sotonwa. The Director provides each constituent with a packet of information on the legislation that we are trying to obtain sponsorship for during the session as well as background information on how and why this would benefit the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community.

As you know, the capitol is a busy place and trying to coordinate our schedule with theirs can be a huge challenge. We are fortunate to be just minutes away from the State Capitol and have received a warm welcome from our elected politicians. Once session has started, I check the updated hearings schedule on a daily basis to see if we should be available to provide testimony or just good, old-fashioned moral support on our pending legislation. After making copies, collating packets, contacting numerous administrative assistants, and keeping track of upcoming hearings, we believe our diligent efforts to push through new legislation will make an impact on the lives of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Missourians.

## Legislative Update

**HB 1696:** House Bill 1696, also called the SSP Bill, will allow MCDHH to provide grants for training and certification of new support service providers (SSPs) and help offset the cost for organizations that utilize SSPs. Having qualified SSPs is essential to providing equal access to daily activities for Deaf-Blind individuals.

On January 26, the House Committee on Children and Families held a public hearing for HB 1696. Deaf-Blind individuals and advocates traveled from across the state to offer testimony and support for the bill, which can be seen in the photos below. The vote took place on February 2. They voted 10-0 in favor of HB 1696. On February 11, the bill was passed by the Select Committee on Social Services. The next hearing has not been scheduled.

There are several ways you can show your support for HB 1696. Contact your representative and explain why Missouri needs SSPs. Keep an eye on MCDHH's emails and social media to know when hearings are scheduled. Change your profile picture to the "MO Needs SSPs" logo and share the infographic (page 4), which can both be found on our Facebook page. You can also submit a video of yourself saying or signing "I support the SSP Bill" to MCDHH to be used in a compilation soon.

**HB 1904:** House Bill 1904, which would establish a text-to-911 service in Missouri, was voted 11-0 to pass by the Committee on Telecommunications, and passed on to the Select Committee on Utilities. This Committee passed the bill as well on February 11. The schedule for the next hearing has not yet been released.



## Community Perspective on Missouri's Deaf World

*Shauna Ward, ASL Instructor, William Woods University*

Deaf people in Missouri are friendly no matter what background they come from. They are specifically warm and welcoming. You can always count on someone to bring over a batch of cookies or help you put away the dishes without being asked! In comparison to other states, Missouri is well known for their “Deaf friendly” towns. I define “Deaf friendly” towns as places where many hearing people know sign language or are familiar with deaf people.

Missouri has some signs that are regional that I had never seen before moving here. I notice a slight variation in signs when going to Gallaudet University, Canada, and Washington State as well, but Missouri has many signs that are unique.

Another thing about the Deaf world in Missouri is—because the deaf communities here are smaller and tighter-knit—regional social groups tend to form. You very often see the same Deaf people within the same crowd. When I go anywhere in public it is easy to spot a deaf person. I can go to the grocery store and see two or three other deaf people I know. My neighbor might be Deaf. It is a small deaf world in Missouri. You will not see this anywhere else. This is an advantage because it is likely these Deaf people live nearby as well. It is not far and few between with Deaf people in Missouri as it usually is anywhere else.

**23rd Annual  
Deaf & Hard of Hearing  
Awareness Day  
@ Six Flags St. Louis**

**June 11, 2016**  
Contact MCDHH to reserve your tickets  
[mcdhh@mcdhh.mo.gov](mailto:mcdhh@mcdhh.mo.gov)  
(573) 526-5205

**MCDHH** **Six Flags**  
ST. LOUIS

## Deaf Interpreters: Established Tradition, Emerging Profession

Jessica Brown, MCDHH Interpreter Certification Specialist

Deaf interpreters (DIs) are not a new concept to the Deaf Community. In fact, they have been around since the 1800s. Deaf people have always been there for one another to reinterpret information if something was unclear or misunderstood. One example is in a classroom setting; if someone did not understand the teacher, a peer would interpret it in a different way. Over time, DIs became more visible and gained recognition at events in Deaf schools, clubs, churches, and family outings. In the early 2000s, the DIs increasingly became certified. A Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI) teams with hearing interpreters to make the message even more clear in the context of Deaf Culture.

I'd like to share some of my personal experiences, my passion for CDIs, and why I am working to become one myself.

I have been Deaf my whole life and have used hearing interpreters since a very early age. One incident that really impacted me took place after I graduated high school. I had a hearing interpreter during a job interview and we both struggled to understand each other. It was extremely disheartening because not only was I unable to access information, but I couldn't express myself to the people around me. Later, while I was attending college, a friend and I both had this same interpreter in a class. Luckily, I was familiar with her communication style, but my friend was not. It was a natural reaction for me to take in the message and then clarify so that my friend had access to the information as well. It was at this moment that I saw the power of access to language and knew I wanted to become an interpreter.

Language defines who I am. It makes the world accessible; it empowers and provides independence. Language unlocks the world around me and the people in it. I began reflecting on my use of language and how I could make my passion become my career. It is important to me that all Deaf people feel the power of language and so I started researching and talking to other Deaf individuals and hearing interpreters. That is when I learned about CDIs and realized it was an avenue I could pursue.

Missouri has a great need for CDIs; however, there are currently no Missouri certified CDIs living in our state. The demand is high, specifically in schools, legal situations, and settings with foreign languages. Preferring the interpretation from a CDI doesn't mean the hearing interpreter is inferior; the preference comes from our shared culture and language which can lead to more effective communication. Becoming a CDI is difficult and requires persistence and determination. I have not allowed any of the frustrations or roadblocks to deter me and have continued to choose this emerging path to pursue my dream.

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**Jessica performing the National Anthem in ASL at the Kansas City Royals Deaf & Hard of Hearing Awareness Day**

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In 1998, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) started offering a test for Deaf individuals to take and to become recognized as Certified Interpreters. RID was established 1964, but at that time they only provided certification for hearing interpreters. The CDI test has proven to be a challenge for many Deaf people that take it and as a result many have failed. The CDI test has not been revised or updated since its release in 1998, and as of now, RID has placed a moratorium on all testing. This moratorium will have little effect on individuals in Missouri that are working on becoming CDIs or hearing interpreters; this is because Missouri is using a new testing instrument called the Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) test. The BEI has set the bar for testing not only because it focuses on

the quality of interpreting but also that the candidate must possess specific skill sets for different audiences. When the audience has complete access is when effective communication exists. It's as though an interpreter is not present at all.

Interpreting is a rewarding profession. Interpreters network, build relationships, break down barriers, and build bridges between the hearing and Deaf communities. Looking back on history, it was the DIs that set the foundation for the field, even when RID was a testing entity only for hearing interpreters. The informal need for DIs showed that the interpreting field needed to improve by not only including CDIs but by raising the bar for hearing interpreters as well. I am still pursuing my dream to become a CDI and I hope that my story will encourage others to pursue it as well. It is my wish to see more collaboration between hearing and Deaf interpreters and that both are seen as equals in the amazing and fulfilling profession of interpreting.

### MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID COURSES

The Missouri Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has joined with AETNA BETTER HEALTH OF MISSOURI and other partners across the state to offer no cost Mental Health First Aid trainings.

These **8 HOUR** trainings will take place in several communities across Missouri and are especially intended for **DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING INDIVIDUALS**.



**March 1-2: St. Louis**  
RTR/DCC  
Day 1: 2-5 pm; Day 2: 9 am-3 pm

**March 15-16: Kansas City**  
DeVry University  
Day 1: 1-5 pm; Day 2: 9 am-1:30 pm

**March 22-23: Columbia**  
Riechmann Pavilion, Stephens Lake Park  
Day 1: 2-5 pm; Day 2: 9 am-2:30 pm

**March 29-30: St. Joseph**  
Wyatt Park Christian Church  
Day 1: 9 am-3:30 pm; Day 2: 8:30-10:30 am

**April 14-15: Springfield**  
Dept. of Mental Health Regional Office  
Day 1: 1-5 pm; Day 2: 9 am-1:30 pm

Mental health challenges – such as depression, anxiety, psychosis and substance use – are shockingly common in the United States. In fact, more than one in five American adults will have a mental health problem in any given year. The National Council for Behavioral Health certifies individuals throughout the nation, to provide Mental Health First Aid courses to prepare their communities with the knowledge and skills to help individuals who are developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. Identified on SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices, the training helps the public better identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses. For more information on Mental Health First Aid, visit [www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org)



#### SEATS ARE FILLING FAST!

**REGISTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH  
FIRST AID TRAINING @**

Laurie Lister  
[Laurie.Lister@mcdhh.mo.gov](mailto:Laurie.Lister@mcdhh.mo.gov)

Registration questions call (573)526-5205

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## Finding My Identity in the Deaf World

*Christopher Ludvigsen, MCDHH Community Support Liaison*



My first experience with learning sign language was with a teacher around the time I was in first grade at Central Institute for the Deaf in the St. Louis area. However, she did not know sign language wasn't allowed on campus. CID's focus was on teaching children to speak accurately. However, I found American Sign Language fascinating and was persistent in using it, despite the school's rules against it.

Upon entering Brentwood Middle School, I could practice more signing. Throughout my middle school years, I was required to wear an FM unit as well as have a sign language interpreter. An FM Unit was not my preferred accommodation because of the background noises, the echo of the teacher's voice, and wearing the loop around my neck.

I had a choice to make before entering Brentwood High School. I could either use a sign language interpreter or use an FM unit for the continuation of my educational years. I chose a sign language interpreter for my better understanding. At age 15, I finally started to realize that I was able to communicate better because of the environment and friends that surrounded me within the Deaf and Hard of Hearing program. While I was finally able to use sign language, I was still required by my high school to attend speech therapy.

Life after high school was liberating. While attending community college, I could choose my own courses and schedule. I worked in a variety of jobs and spent time with family and friends. I still didn't know for sure what I wanted to do, but had narrowed my possible paths down to three fields: journalism, psychology, and business. I realized that if I wanted to be successful in any of these fields, I would need to continue my education.

I eventually settled on business administration. While continuing my studies at community college, I received a brochure in the mail from Gallaudet University. I disregarded it, concluding that Gallaudet wasn't for me. It was when my father found the pamphlet that he persuaded me to consider transferring. Ultimately, this is what I ended up doing in 2004.

Entering my first year at Gallaudet University was awkward, as college often is. In my St. Louis community, communication relied heavily on oral rather than signed methods. I was finally at a university where the culture was full-fledged Deaf. I knew my sign language was not up to par, I had more to learn about Deaf Culture, and I was entering another world. Sign language became the language inside classrooms, inside dormitories, homes, and outside of Gallaudet.

I grew to love this environment and didn't want it to end. I wanted to stay with the friends I made at Gallaudet and continue surrounding myself with people who shared my culture. However, I also wanted to gain additional education in the business world.

I accepted an internship at United States Patent and Trademark Office in 2008 when the housing market was collapsing, the stock market was disintegrating, and a great recession was beginning. After a pounding of nightly news, it was evident job availability would be rough and virtually impossible, especially for a recent graduate. I decided to move back home to Saint Louis and began studies for a Master's degree in management and leadership at Webster University. I also became more involved with deaf organizations, like the Missouri Association of the Deaf.

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## Navigating Missouri's Deaf World

Emily Fry, MCDHH Information Program Specialist



It's safe to say that 2015 was a big year for me. I finished my graduate degree, landed my first full time job, rented my first apartment, and got engaged. These are all milestones I've come to expect at some point, although not necessarily all at once or so soon. The real surprise turn I took in 2015 was in June when I accepted my current position as the Information Program Specialist at MCDHH and began to immerse myself in the Deaf World.

My background is in public relations and communications, with some vague notion of "working to help others." I didn't know where this would take me, but I wouldn't have expected to be exposed to a new culture, immersed in a new language, and to communicate with people whose experiences are so diverse. I don't ever remember meeting a Deaf person before my interview with MCDHH, and I had never really considered learning sign language until I was checking out books and DVDs from the library to start my path to understanding my new coworkers. You could say the learning curve has been steep.

The most surprising thing that I'm still trying to wrap my head around is the diversity in how people identify their hearing loss, and how differently that is manifested. Some people prefer to communicate with me through interpreters, and others can read my lips enough to make up for my elementary sign language. Others rely on CART or tactile sign language. Some groups within this community focus on improving the quality and accessibility of technology to be able to hear better, while others wish to keep their unique culture intact and encourage society to be accepting.

As it is my duty with MCDHH to bring more programs and information to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Missourians, I believe understanding the differences between these groups is the most vital part of my job. The idea of having differentiated messages for different groups of people is one of the core principles in strategic communications that I studied throughout college. Different groups have different needs, both in terms of the information they need to receive and how they need to receive it.

MCDHH seeks to represent all of these groups, which is only possible if we look closely at the needs of each. I look forward to discovering what I can do to advocate for each group: from hard of hearing to "capitol D Deaf," to veterans with hearing loss, to Deaf-Blind, to late-deafened persons. As I continue my journey here, I invite you to reach out to me if you have ideas of how we at MCDHH can improve communication with someone like you!

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After holding a variety of jobs and going to school on and off, I began working at MCDHH in 2012 and finished my Master's in 2014. I love working at MCDHH; the position I hold allows me to advise Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, witnessing their abilities, and empower them to advocate for their community. I also continue to enjoy being involved in many different issues that are happening within the Deaf World in Missouri. As I am continuing at MCDHH, I am also working on a Ph. D. in management with an emphasis in leadership and organizational change. Ultimately, I would like to return to Gallaudet as a teacher to inspire Deaf and Hard of Hearing students to become leaders in their future careers.

## **Mark Your Calendar!** ***For Upcoming MCDHH Events***

### **- February -**

No public events

### **- March -**

**1-2: Mental Health First Aid Training, St. Louis\***

**15-16: Mental Health First Aid Training, Kansas City\***

**22-23: Mental Health First Aid Training, Columbia\***

**29-30: Mental Health First Aid Training, St. Joseph\***

**31: Commission Meeting, 10 am-4 pm, MCDHH Conference Room**

### **- April -**

**14-15: Mental Health First Aid Training, Springfield\***

**16: Voting Presentation and other workshops, Springfield, The Library Station**

**30: Voting Presentation and other workshops, Kansas City, The Whole Person**

**\*See Page 8 for more details**



**Missouri Commission for the  
Deaf and Hard of Hearing**  
1500 Southridge Dr., Ste. 201  
Jefferson City, MO 65109



**MCDHH Staff and  
Commissioners after Governor  
Nixon's State of the State  
Address on January 20.**

[Left to Right: Christopher Ludvigsen,  
Paul Blicharz, Opeoluwa Sotonwa, Jessica  
Brown, Crystal Anderson, Ernest Garrett,  
Emily Fry]

**What do YOU want to see in the next  
Missouri Communicator?**

**Share your ideas with us. Submit your article topics, newsletter  
themes, photos, or *Community Perspective* proposals to the editor at  
[Emily.Fry@mcdhh.mo.gov](mailto:Emily.Fry@mcdhh.mo.gov) for consideration.**