



Deaf Services Comprehensive Assessment Summary
Department of Human Services
August 2018

Introduction

The South Dakota Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services authorized this assessment of telecommunications services and programs and sign language interpreter services. The assessment was conducted by the University of South Dakota, Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders. The first part of this report describes the nationwide survey of telecommunications programs focused on funding mechanisms, services, equipment offered, and state-by-state requirements for sign language interpreter services. The second part reports survey results and focus group feedback on these same services in South Dakota.

Part 1: National Assessment

The purpose of part one of the telecommunications assessment project was to collect information regarding Telecommunication Relay Services (TRS), telecommunications equipment, and sign language interpreter services from the other states. The results are based on information reported by individual state programs through websites, email contacts, and telephone contacts.

What We Learned

1. Telecommunications Equipment Distribution

The Department of Human Services offers telecommunications equipment to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have speech impediments through the Telecommunication Equipment Distribution Program (TED). South Dakota is one of forty-five states to offer a TED, and is one of twenty-seven of those states have income guidelines for this program. In South Dakota, income guidelines are not applied to TTYs and devices under \$250.

South Dakota is one of twenty-four states that report their telecommunications programs are also responsible for providing equipment and services to people with disabilities other than hearing loss or speech impairment, such as vision loss, cognitive impairment, and/or mobility impairment. South Dakota provides equipment in a similar fashion for individuals with vision, cognition, and mobility difficulties through the Telecommunications Adaptive Devices (TAD) program.

South Dakota is one of fourteen states that offer tablet and/or smartphone options that permit video communication through these equipment programs. This advanced technology permits additional telecommunication options to users (ex: facetime), and the devices are portable.

2. TRS Fees

Telecommunications programs/relay service funding: South Dakota charges a flat rate of \$0.15 per phone line. This rate ranks South Dakota at seventeenth out of nineteen states that also apply a flat fee per phone line per month. Although South Dakota's flat rate is comparatively high, the state offers more services and technology than most states. For example, South Dakota's tablet/phone vendor has reported that South Dakota's customer service is exemplary when compared to other states. South Dakota's program delivers devices with necessary apps pre-loaded, and a vendor offers in-person training on devices to participants. The assessment results were limited to the information that was made available from other states. Some states' data was not available, and other states may use other revenue streams to supplement TRS fees. This makes it difficult to draw conclusions based only on the fees that were collected in this assessment.

3. Hearing Aid Assistance Program and Cochlear Implant Assistance Program

With the help of the state legislature, in 2015 the Department of Human Services began offering hearing aids to children through the Hearing Aid Assistance Program (HAAP). Thirty-three states have established a HAAP; South Dakota is one of fourteen of those states that offer a HAAP for children only.

It was discovered that South Dakota is the only state to operate a Cochlear Implant Program. A cochlear implant consists of a surgically implanted device and an externally worn processor. The Cochlear Implant Program offers financial assistance to families for the cost of a cochlear implant for individuals less than twenty-one years of age. While the program is relatively small, it does provide help to those families in need.

4. Sign Language Interpreter Regulations

Part 1 also explored how states regulate the providers of sign language interpreting in states. South Dakota is comparable to most other states in this area; regulation of this occupation protects the state from negligence and ensures that interpreters who are registered in the state are competent and qualified.

- Thirty-three states, including South Dakota, allow for or require passing the National Association of the Deaf exam in order to provide interpreting in the state.
- Thirty-two states, including South Dakota, require passing a national exam to work in legal settings.
- Forty-six states, including South Dakota, require educational interpreters to pass an education-specific interpreter exam.

Part 2: South Dakota Assessment

Part two of the South Dakota telecommunication assessment focused on collecting feedback from individuals in the state who receive the services in Part 1. The research team conducted two focus group sessions (in Sioux Falls and Rapid City), and an online survey with the same open-ended survey questions used with the focus groups to allow for more feedback.

What We Learned

1. Communication Assistance Program

The Communication Assistance Program provides sign language training to people who are deaf and their families, Communication Integration Skills training, and other services to help people who are deaf to achieve increased integration in their community. Feedback from survey respondents indicated they were aware of the Communication Assistance Services provided through the program, but only a small percentage of respondents (17%) indicated use of the Communication Assistance services. Those respondents who received services through the program were very satisfied with services.

2. Telecommunication Equipment Distribution Program

The Telecommunication Equipment Distribution Program (TED) offers telecommunications equipment to people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or have speech impediments. Comments about what works well in the Telecommunication Equipment Distribution Program in South Dakota focused on the iPads and iPhones offered through the program. These items were favored because they allow individuals to communicate directly with communication partners rather than going through a sign language interpreter on a video relay service. One participant expressed appreciation for how quickly the Communication Services for the Deaf – Sioux Falls office sends equipment out. Another comment expressed a preference for Apple products (such as iPads and iPods) that last longer than Android tablet products.

Respondents noted that the repair of telecommunication technology through the vendor can sometimes leave the individual without a necessary telecommunication system. Just over half of respondents reported that the RelaySD website was easy to use.

3. Hearing Aid Assistance Program and Cochlear Implant Program

Data suggest a need for the South Dakota Hearing Aid Assistance Program (HAAP) and Cochlear Implant Program (CIP), and feedback from survey respondents indicates that these programs are not well known.

Recommendations

1. TED and TAD Device Repair

Recommendation: make policy and procedural changes where possible to reduce the time that it takes to repair iPhones and iPads received through the TED and TAD programs. Due date: completed.

The repair of iPhones and iPads goes through the state's vendor, leaving the individual without their preferred telecommunication system. The state has been communicating with the vendor who issues the iDevices to determine best practices for quick repair turnaround. Changes already implemented: state staff in charge of program administration are now receiving weekly reports on devices that are sent in for repair, and the vendor has taken steps to streamline their process to shorten the time that it takes to return the repaired device.

2. Optimize Outreach

Recommendation: DRS will increase outreach for not only TRS services but also the other programs such as the HAAP, CIP, and Communication Assistance program. Due date: end of CY 2018.

Several participants focused on the need to advertise or market the telecommunication programs and to make information resources easier to use. In addition to increased outreach, DRS will standardize the use of satisfaction surveys for these programs to measure performance on an ongoing basis.

3. Increase services to children with hearing loss and their families

Recommendation: increase the communication services provided to children who are deaf and their family members. Due date: end of CY 2019.

Participants identified a need to provide parents of children who are deaf or hard of hearing with more comprehensive information about communication options. Currently DRS contracts with a vendor to provide services through the Communication Assistance Program. DRS will be working with CSD staff on increasing these services to children with hearing loss and their family.