

2015

# Available Telephone Services for Older Virginians Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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## Recommended Citation

Bowen, C. (2015). Available Telephone Services for Older Virginians Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. *Age in Action*, 30(2), 1-6.

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## Case Study

### Available Telephone Services for Older Virginians Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

by Clayton E. Bowen, Relay and Technology Programs Manager, Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

#### Educational Objectives:

1. To identify signs of hearing loss in older adults.
2. To introduce the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH) and some of its programs and services.
3. To examine three VDDHH services and qualification guidelines.
4. To review how service recipients benefit from these programs.

#### Background

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), hearing loss is one of the most common conditions affecting older adults. Approximately 17 percent, or 36 million, of

American adults report some degree of hearing loss. There is a strong relationship between age and reported hearing loss: 18 percent of American adults 45-64 years old, 30 percent of adults 65-74 years old, and 47 percent of adults 75 years old, or older, have a hearing impairment. Men are more likely to experience hearing loss than women.

People with hearing loss may find it hard to have a conversation with friends and family. They may also have difficulty understanding conversation in a crowd; understanding certain people's voices; responding to warnings, and hearing doorbells and alarms. Some may not want to admit to having trouble hearing. Older adults who can't hear well may become depressed or may withdraw from others to avoid feeling frustrated or embarrassed about not understanding what is being said. Sometimes they are mistakenly thought to be confused, unresponsive, or uncooperative just because they don't hear well.

The Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (VDDHH) and Virginia Relay pro-

vide the most up-to-date technologies and assistive devices to enable people who are deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, or who have difficulty speaking, to communicate via a standard telephone network.

We will review the signs of hearing loss; Virginia Relay services administered by VDDHH, and three programs that offer no, or low-cost telecommunications equipment for older adults and others who are deaf or hard of hearing: the Technology Assistance Program (TAP), TAP for Veterans, and iCanConnect.

#### Indications of Hearing Loss

In order to identify a need for assistive devices, such as hearing aids or telephones with amplified ringers and volume/tone controls, one must be able to identify the signs of hearing loss. Ask yourself, or those you suspect having a hearing loss, the following questions:

1. Do you have a problem hearing over the telephone?
2. Do you have trouble following the conversation when two or more people are talking at the same time?

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3. Do people complain that you turn the TV volume up too high?
4. Do you have to strain to understand conversation?
5. Do you have trouble hearing in a noisy background?
6. Do you find yourself asking people to repeat themselves?
7. Do many people you talk to seem to mumble (or not speak clearly)?
8. Do you misunderstand what others are saying and respond inappropriately?
9. Do you have trouble understanding the speech of women and children?
10. Do people get annoyed because you misunderstand what they say?

If the answer is “yes” to three or more of these questions, consider a hearing evaluation with a physician or a certified audiologist. Additionally, consider the services of the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing or one of the other service providers listed in our resource list.

### **Virginia Relay**

A free public service, Virginia Relay connects people who are deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, or who have difficulty speaking with standard telephone users, relaying the conversation between both parties. Relay services are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, with no limit on the number or length of calls a user may make. Anyone may initiate a Virginia Relay call, anytime, by simply dialing 7-1-1. After reaching Virginia Relay, callers give the Virginia Relay Communications Assistant (CA) the phone number of the person or business they wish to contact. Once a connection is made, the CA relays the

conversation between both parties. Virginia Relay users can establish a personal profile that will let the CA automatically know their calling preference, whether TTY (text telephone), VCO (voice carry-over), HCO (hearing carry-over) or Voice. All information is confidential, and a password is required to access and/or edit a profile. A Relay Choice Profile saves time and speeds up Relay calls dramatically. For multiple users calling from the same business or home location, Virginia Relay offers a Multi-User Relay Choice Profile (MURCP).

By law, the CA communicates the typed or spoken words exactly as given and maintains absolute confidentiality about all conversations. To ensure equal access, CAs type everything they hear, including background noises and voice intonations. There is no charge to use Virginia Relay within the local calling area, and there are no set-up fees, even for calls made from public and TTY pay phones. Long-distance calls are billed to the indicated provider of choice (if there is no designated preferred long-distance carrier, calls are billed through Virginia Relay’s own long-distance provider at a discounted rate.)

### **Types of Relay Services**

#### ***TTY (Text Telephone)***

People with hearing or speech loss commonly use a TTY to make calls. A TTY looks much like a phone, except for a typewriter-style keyboard with letters and numbers and a text screen. During Relay calls, TTY users type their side of the conversation and read the other party’s response on their TTY’s text

screen.

#### ***VCO (Voice Carry-Over)***

This feature is for people who can speak clearly, yet have hearing loss significant enough to keep them from understanding what is being said over a standard telephone. Using a specially designed telephone that also has a text screen, VCO users speak directly to the person being called. In response, the words of the person being called are typed by the Virginia Relay Communications Assistant (CA), and VCO users read those words on their phone’s text screen. No typing by the VCO user is required.

**Two-Line VCO:** This feature allows Virginia Relay VCO users with two telephone lines to use one line for speaking directly to the person they are calling and the other line to receive the text of that person’s conversation.

#### ***STS (Speech-To-Speech)***

For people with mild to moderate speech difficulties who can hear clearly over a standard telephone, Virginia Relay offers Speech-To-Speech, or STS. Convenient and easy to use, STS requires no typing or special equipment. The feature is ideal for those with speech limitations due to cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, Parkinson’s disease, stroke, stuttering, or traumatic brain injury. On an STS or HCO call, the CA will then ask if you want him or her to play an active or passive role during the call. If the STS user wants the CA to play an active role, the CA will repeat everything the user says to

the other person. When asked to take a passive role, the CA will only intervene or facilitate upon request.

### ***HCO (Hearing Carry-Over)***

For people with significant speech disabilities who can hear what is being said over the telephone, there's Hearing Carry-Over, or HCO. During an HCO call, the person with the speech disability uses a TTY or similar device to type his or her side of the conversation.

### ***Captioned Telephone (CapTel®)***

Virginia Relay CapTel service is designed for individuals who have difficulty hearing on the telephone and are able to speak for themselves. Through the use of a CapTel phone, users listen while viewing word-for-word captions of what's said to them during phone conversations. Captions appear on the bright, built-in display screen of the CapTel phone just moments after the other party has spoken. Individuals who are hard of hearing; late-deafened; deaf with understandable speech, or who have a cochlear implant, but who can no longer use an amplified phone, benefit from using Virginia Relay CapTel. Web and mobile versions of CapTel are also available for PC/Mac, Smartphones, and Tablets.

### **TAP**

Virginia's Technology Assistance Program (TAP) provides telecommunications equipment to all qualified applicants whose disabilities prevent them from using a standard telephone. To qualify for the program, individuals must be deaf,

hard of hearing, deafblind, or have difficulty speaking. Applicants must also be Virginia residents and meet income eligibility requirements that are based on household income and family size. There are no age restrictions but applications from minors must be co-signed by a parent or legal guardian.

Equipment is provided to qualified individuals on a Loan-to-Own (L2O) basis. This gives qualified recipients up to 30 days to decide whether to keep, exchange, or return the equipment. If, following the 30-day period, the recipient thinks that the device enables him or her to communicate successfully over the phone, he or she retains ownership of the device.

Assistive devices available through TAP L2O include:

- TTY's (text telephones)
- Amplified telephones
- Voice Carry-Over (VCO) phones
- CapTel®, captioning telephones
- Outgoing speech amplifier phones
- Signalers for the phone and door
- Hearing Carry-Over (HCO) phones
- Other devices available by special request

All devices through TAP carry a one-year manufacturer's warranty, and training on use of the equipment is available. TAP participants can apply for new equipment every four years.

VDDHH outreach specialists can also provide information and referral for assistive technology devices, demonstrate proper equipment use, highlight key features of various devices, and identify vendor

options and discounts for applicants. For more information, contact the VDDHH outreach office in your area.

### **TAP for Veterans**

Military veterans and surviving family members living with hearing or speech loss are also eligible to apply for no-cost telecommunications equipment through the Technology Assistance Program (TAP).

To qualify, you must be:

- A veteran with a hearing or speech loss and proof of an Honorable Discharge.
- A veteran with a hearing or speech loss and documentation of a service-related disability rating from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- A surviving spouse or child of a veteran who was killed in the line of duty and has a hearing or speech loss.
- An active member of the Virginia National Guard with a hearing or speech loss who has completed the required initial active-duty service.

### **iCanConnect**

Administered by VDDHH in cooperation with the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired, iCanConnect Virginia provides no-cost communications technology, along with installation, training and support, to low-income Virginia residents who are DeafBlind. Available assistive devices and software include screen enlargement software, screen readers, computers, signalers, braille displays, mobile devices, and more. A qualified iCanConnect Virginia equipment

specialist helps qualified applicants identify the best equipment for their needs and provides any necessary training and support.

iCanConnect ensures that low-income individuals who have combined hearing and vision loss can access telephone, advanced communications, and information services. This program was mandated by the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010 and established by the Federal Communications Commission.

To qualify for the program, applicants must:

- Have combined vision and hearing loss to be considered DeafBlind as that term is defined by the Helen Keller National Center Act. A practicing professional who has direct knowledge of the individual's vision and hearing loss, such as vision- or hearing-related professionals, educators, medical professionals, or community-based service providers, must verify that the individual is DeafBlind.
- Have an income that does not exceed 400 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG). Applicants who are enrolled in federal subsidy programs with income thresholds lower than 400 percent of the FPG are automatically deemed income eligible for this program. Applicants who are not enrolled in a qualifying federal low-income program must be deemed eligible by review of a recent income tax return or other means.

### Case Study 1

Mr. Campbell first noticed his hear-

ing loss while serving in Vietnam as a member of a Marine Corps infantry company. While on night patrol, he discovered that he couldn't understand what was said when people whispered into his ear. After leaving Vietnam, he hid his hearing loss as best he could. However, while on subsequent night patrol training, his secret was uncovered when his commanding officer noticed that he was unable to hear and ordered his medical evacuation.

Mr. Campbell was transported to a Naval Hospital, where he was placed with a group of people who were all experiencing hearing loss and fitted with an early-model hearing aid, a large body pack that he wore on his belt with a big, thick cord that attached to a headpiece. He spent two months at the hospital, learning oral rehabilitation and speech reading skills. The hospital recommended that he be medically discharged from the military, but he was proud of his career as a Marine and appealed the decision. He was allowed to stay on active duty, but he had to retrain in a new occupational field and agree to not to be exposed to loud noises.

He earned his bachelor degree in psychology and a master degree in education while still on active duty and went on to have a successful military career as a drug and alcohol counselor. After his retirement, he transitioned into the corporate world but still struggled at times to adjust to his 60 percent hearing loss.

"At the time, I knew nothing about hearing assistive technology," he says. "I remember sitting up in my hotel room at night, wearing my

hearing aids, trying to sleep and just hoping that I would hear the phone, the door, or the alarm clock, because if I laid down without my hearing aids I couldn't hear any of it. It was a big shock to me the first time I went to a Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) meeting, and someone told me about the Shake Awake alarm clock. It was just so enlightening and remarkable to me that I lived through all of those years of work until my retirement without any one ever telling me that these things were out there."

In addition to hearing aids, Mr. Campbell also uses a hearing loop at home when he watches television and in his classrooms when he teaches. At home and at work, he uses CapTel phones, a technology that he loves even though the high-security environment at his government office sometimes makes use of the captioning service difficult. Because he knows first-hand how hard it can be for people newly diagnosed with hearing loss to find the information and resources they need, he is now dedicated to educating both audiologists and consumers about the various forms of hearing assistive technology that are available.

"Because of my service connection, I get a free hearing aid evaluation every three years, and that can be extremely valuable to people who need it. Veterans have two years after they come back from deployment to get free medical care through the Department of Veterans Affairs, and I encourage all veterans to schedule a free audiological evaluation at their local VA office. For veterans experiencing hearing

loss, I urge them to seek out their local HLAA chapter, and use the Internet to learn everything they can about hearing loss and hearing assistive technology. Be aware of the huge array of services available through Virginia Relay and the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Don't wait as long as I did to find answers as to what's out there."

## Case Study 2

Mrs. Morrison is 68 years old and lives in a housing complex for older adults. Legally blind and severely hard of hearing, she was having difficulty working her microwave and stove, getting around in the community, and accessing the telephone. She received independent living services, including orientation and mobility training related to her vision loss, through the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired. However, her hearing loss was causing her the most anxiety. Problems included difficulty hearing on the telephone, knowing when the telephone was ringing, hearing the alarm on her clock, knowing when someone was at her door, and knowing when the smoke alarm was activated. She loved her apartment but felt alone and cut off from people because of her hearing loss. She was afraid she would oversleep and miss her ride to her medical appointments. Her neighbors would often tell her that they had knocked on her door, but she never answered.

Through the programs at VDDHH, Mrs. Morrison received a loud ringing telephone with an adjustable volume and tone control; a tactile alerting device to let her know

when the telephone was ringing, when the alarm clock and smoke detector were activated; as well as a portable doorbell. She was provided with an alerting device receiver that lets her know, through different vibration patterns, which alerting device is activated. She now feels safe in her apartment, can communicate over the telephone, and is not afraid she will miss visitors. "I feel like I have my life back."

## Conclusion

Virginia Relay and the VDDHH can help older adults and other individuals with hearing loss to stay connected with family, friends, and their community, and to communicate fully through a wide range of services and programs. People who have difficulty using the telephone may qualify for one or more of several low or no-cost equipment distribution programs, and are urged to contact their local VDDHH office to explore what adaptive equipment and services might be best for their individual needs.

## Study Questions

1. What are the major signs of hearing loss in older adults?
2. What services does Virginia Relay offer to connect people who are deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or who have difficulty speaking with standard telephone users?
3. What are the three low or no-cost equipment distribution programs available in Virginia for qualified older adults and other individuals who have difficulty using the telephone?
4. How can difficulty or inability to communicate using the telephone affect daily life for older adults with

hearing loss?

## Resources

### Hearing Loss Association of Virginia

Virginia State Chapter Coordinator  
Donald Doherty  
[dondoherty@mchsi.com](mailto:dondoherty@mchsi.com)

### -Central Virginia Chapter (Charlottesville area)

Kristin Koch  
[drkoch@evolutionhearing.com](mailto:drkoch@evolutionhearing.com)  
Ron Keeney  
[Ron@KeeneyArchitecture.com](mailto:Ron@KeeneyArchitecture.com)

### -Greater Richmond Chapter

Linda Wallace  
[grhearingloss@verizon.net](mailto:grhearingloss@verizon.net)  
[www.hlagreaterrichmond.com](http://www.hlagreaterrichmond.com)

### -Rappahannock Chapter

Arva Priola [apriola@cildrc.org](mailto:apriola@cildrc.org)

### -Virginia Beach Chapter

Donald Doherty  
[dondoherty@mchsi.com](mailto:dondoherty@mchsi.com)  
[www.hlaavirginiabeach.com](http://www.hlaavirginiabeach.com)

### Helen Keller National Center, Senior Adult Services

Paige Berry [paige.berry@hknc.org](mailto:paige.berry@hknc.org)  
[www.hknc.org](http://www.hknc.org)

### iCanConnect

National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program in Virginia  
[www.icanconnectvirginia.com](http://www.icanconnectvirginia.com) or contact VDDHH at (800) 552-7917 (voice/TTY), (804) 662-9502 (voice/TTY), or [frontdesk@vddhh.virginia.gov](mailto:frontdesk@vddhh.virginia.gov)

### National Institutes of Health

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/hearingloss/hearinglossdefined/01.html>

**Technology Assistance Program (TAP) and TAP for Veterans**

[www.vddhh.org/tapabout.htm](http://www.vddhh.org/tapabout.htm)

(800) 552-7917 (voice/TTY)

You may also contact the VDDHH outreach office nearest you. For a list of office locations, visit [www.vddhh.org/orproviders.aspx](http://www.vddhh.org/orproviders.aspx) or call (800) 552-7917 (voice/text).

**Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired**

Elizabeth Spiers, Program Director,  
Deaf-Blind Services  
[elizabeth.spiers@dbvi.virginia.gov](mailto:elizabeth.spiers@dbvi.virginia.gov)

**Virginia Relay**

[www.varelay.org](http://www.varelay.org)

Contact the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing at (800) 552-7917 (voice/TTY) or [frontdesk@vddhh.virginia.gov](mailto:frontdesk@vddhh.virginia.gov).

**About the Author**



Clayton Bowen is the Relay and Technology Programs Manager at the Virginia Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

(VDDHH). He has been with VDDHH since 1988. An active member of the National Association for State Relay Administration, he has served on the National Interstate Telecommunications Relay Services Council and has participated in numerous FCC disability advisory groups. You may contact Clayton at [clayton.bowen@vddhh.virginia.gov](mailto:clayton.bowen@vddhh.virginia.gov).