

To: John Bell, Chair, Virginia School of the Deaf and Blind (VSDB), and State Senator (VA)
Patricia Trice, Superintendent of the Virginia School of the Deaf and Blind (VSDB)

From: Daphne Cox, Member, Board of Visitors for the Virginia School of the Deaf and Blind

Cc: Glenn Youngkin, Governor (Virginia)
Jason Miyares, JD, Attorney General (Virginia)
Aimee Guidera, Secretary of Education (Virginia)
Susan Clarke Schaar, Clerk of the Senate (Virginia)
Michele Paoni VanBoxlaere, Virginia School for the Deaf Alumni Association (VSDAA) President
Michele Long, Virginia Association of the Deaf (VAD) President
Ghazala Hashmi, VSDB Board Member
Sally Hudson, VSDB Board Member
John Avoli, VSDB Board Member
Mike Asip, VSDB Board Member
Vera Wilson, VSDB Board Member
Carolyn Berry, VSDB Board Member
JH Cline, Jr., VSDB Board Member
Ronald Lanier, VSDB Board Member
Christine Ogden, VSDB Board Member

Subject: Accessibility Issues at the July 20, 2023 VSDB Board of Visitors Meeting

As a Deaf member of the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind (VSDB) Board of Visitors, I am sharing an issue of great concern: the lack of accommodations and accessibility issues for individuals with disabilities, including myself, at the July 20, 2023 meeting of the VSDB Board of Visitors at the Pocahontas Building, Senate Room A, 900 E. Main Street, Richmond, VA, 23219.

Senator Bell and Superintendent Trice, you chose to move this meeting from its normal location on the VSDB campus to the Pocahontas Building. According to your July 19, 2023 email to the BOV members, Senator Bell you explained the change in venue in this way, "As the Chair, in conjunction with the Attorney General's office and the Department of Education, we have decided to relocate the meeting to Senate Room at the Pocahontas building. This was done to accommodate the expected high turnout from the public. Our main priority is ensuring the safety and security of the students who will be returning to the VSDB campus. By relocating to Richmond for the July meeting, we can welcome a larger audience, provide more interpreters (4), have increased security with Capitol Police, and offer a video livestream with closed captioning for those who cannot attend."

The reasons for relocating the July meeting do not make sense.

- First of all, the students were not scheduled to return to campus until August 6th.
- The Senate A room was $\frac{3}{4}$ smaller than VSDB's Main Hall Chapel and consequently did not enable a larger audience.
- The Senate A room had numerous columns which created barriers affecting the ability of the Deaf members and visitors to see the interpreters. The room was also dark compared to the Main Hall Chapel which is well-lit and without columns.

- VSDB security experienced no difficulty in providing safety and security at the March 8 meeting on the VSDB campus—despite a large turnout of alumni, employees, and other interested parties. Why Capitol Police were needed is completely unclear given that there had been absolutely no history of safety and security concerns.
- One reason you proposed to move the meeting to Richmond was so that we would have more interpreters. In fact, we had the same number of interpreters (two for Deaf board members and another two for the stakeholders) as we have had at previous meetings of the Board.
- There was a big area for the galley of the stakeholders to comfortably watch the March 8th board meeting in action with an exception that the superintendent intentionally put two Deaf board members with their backs against the audience which prevented them from directly seeing them sign during the meeting. The superintendent had no right to move the Deaf board members for seating set up without discussing their accessibility needs.

So that you understand the inadequate accommodations at the July 20 meeting, I am providing these examples:

Room: The room was somewhat dark and $\frac{3}{4}$ smaller than our usual Main Hall Chapel at VSDB in Staunton. One large column in the middle of Senate A room created a serious barrier for the Deaf stakeholders and Deaf members of the BOV. The interpreters tried a number of different places to stand or sit to reduce because of the column. Senate Room A was not a Deaf-Friendly environment.

Seating Arrangement: Senate Room A had two sections of seating for the public. The stakeholders had to move their chairs to have a sufficient and unobstructed view of the interpreter and the BOV.

The seating for the Deaf Board members was also inadequate. For some reason, the other Deaf Board member, Ron Lanier, was assigned to a seat directly behind me on the far right of the Board members' section. Being in front of him meant that I could not see him when he spoke during the meeting, and he could not see what I signed when I was on the floor. The board seating was behind a countertop. Since it was up to my chest, I had no choice but to stand if I wanted the stakeholders to see my signs. The positioning of Ron and me in the Board section with the obstruction of the countertop demonstrates a lack of understanding of ADA requirements.

Likewise, a podium was placed in front of the Board's two-row seating setup. Stakeholders wishing to make remarks needed to walk to the podium in front of the two-seating row board. The Deaf stakeholders sitting in the audience had to watch interpreters or the TV to have access the remarks made during the one-minute public comment portion of the meeting.

Video Streaming/TV Monitor: Several tv monitors hung from the ceiling. The captions were very small and gibberish. The captions should have been white with a black background for ease of reading. Accessibility would have been improved if a picture in picture (PIP) of an ASL interpreter had been added to the monitors. A PIP would have allowed Deaf attendees to have a choice of watching the ASL interpreter or reading the captions or both. Because of the multiple caption errors (i.e., dead (deaf), death (deaf), and PSDB (VSDB)), having a PIP would enable the Deaf attendees to switch from the captions to the ASL interpreter with ease. I also note that the cameraperson only filmed a small portion of my comments during the Board meeting.

Individuals watching the meeting remotely shared the following frustrations: the video view was too small and watching the videostream caused eye strain. Concerns were also expressed about the screen being divided into four views (blind seating section, BOV chair, Superintendent, and meeting in action). Remote viewers and attendees found the screen view too busy, too distracting, and too small. Coupled with the gibberish captions, the videostreaming was difficult to follow.

Viewing Barrier: Interpreter on duty for the Deaf stakeholders had to leave the area to allow them to directly watch their Deaf board member sign while on the floor.

The bottom line is that this meeting failed to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act requirements. Prior to the September meeting, the conveners (the two of you) should obtain and follow the guidance available from ADA experts to ensure the facilities, assigned seating arrangements, personnel (interpreters/skilled video operator), and equipment (video displays, captioning) meet the legal requirements of ADA. While I have addressed only the issue of accessibility for the Deaf members and stakeholders, the ADA experts with whom you contact should also explore the issue of accessibility for the Blind members and stakeholders.

Failure to meet ADA requirements is unacceptable—especially for a State entity focused on the education of deaf and blind students. We should model not only ADA compliance but, by our example, demonstrate a true commitment to accessibility.

If you have further questions about this letter or would like to discuss its contents, please let me know. I look forward to attending and participating in the September Board meeting—hopefully, with the concerns expressed in this letter being fully addressed and appropriate accommodations in place.