

THE COMMUNICATOR



OUTREACH & ADVOCACY EVENTS!

The NCDHH team has been very active over the summer with outreach events all across Nebraska. Community and outreach events are a great way for the agency to collaborate with stakeholders and the community to spread awareness about who we are, what we do, and how we can help.

Some of the recent events we have been a part of include Deaf and Hard of Hearing Awareness Day at the Omaha Zoo - where we partner with Nebraska Association of the Deaf and Nebraska Hands and Voices to bring community members and families together to learn about resources and information available - all while enjoying a fun day at the zoo! NCDHH has had a presence at two baseball events - Deaf and Hard of Hearing Awareness Night at the Lincoln Saltdogs Game, and All Abilities Night at the Omaha Storm Chasers.

Other areas we reach Nebraska residents are booths, conventions, and conferences. Our team has attended educational conferences such as the American Society for Deaf Children, hosted booths at events such as the Career Fair for the American Job Center, Kool-Aid Days in Hastings, Omaha Pride, Disability Pride, as well as representation at the National Association of the Deaf and Hearing Loss Association of America Conferences. These are just a few of the many events our team has been busy at. If you know of an event you'd like to collaborate with our agency for, please reach out!



IN THIS ISSUE

**HOW CAN THE WEATHER
IMPACT YOUR MOOD?**

**BACK TO SCHOOL
ADVOCACY TIPS**

**LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT
FOR CHILDREN**

**BE YOUR OWN BEST
ADVOCATE!**

Interview with PSC Program Manager, Brett Bode

Aaron Rothenberger, Advocacy Specialist - Kearney
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This quarter I was able to interview the new program manager for the Nebraska Public Service Commission NSTEP program, Brett Bode

After spending 24 years working in the telecommunications industry working at Lumen and supporting Wholesale and Local Business Voice Products, Brett Bode joins the PSC as the new Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) Program Manager, in the Telecommunications department.



He holds a M.B.A from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and a B.S. in Finance from Drake University.

Brett lives in Omaha with his wife Marie and their three kids Alaria (21), Bradyn (20), and Kaiya (16). In his spare time, he is working on a home or yard projects, or repairing of the family cars or helping out at their church. He also enjoys trying out new recipes and helping with any of the many crafts the family has going on.

How much had you dealt with Deaf and HOH people before this position?

On a professional level, in my past roles I have only dealt with support of deaf and HOH individuals indirectly. In my Product management roles over the past 15 years, I have supported both Local and Wholesale Voice products, and as part of those products I have supported connectivity with TRS and other services that would have provided support for the Deaf/HOH community. However, in those roles I was not working directly with the community and instead just helping to ensure continued support of these offerings at my company. After leaving Lumen/CenturyLink, I hoped to continue to put my Telecommunications background to good use, and with my familiarity with these programs, saw the opportunity with the Commission as a great opportunity to stay in the Telecommunication field, but now get to directly support the Deaf and HOH community.

On a personal level, my mom has had hearing loss since her mid 20's and so I am familiar with some of the difficulties that individuals who are HOH can have in day-to-day life. As my parents have gotten older, both are having issues with hearing loss. Additionally, I have found that my father-in-law is also struggling with hearing loss and is now looking for ways to address this. So, I do have some personal exposure to the impacts of hearing loss and how helpful some of the current equipment can be with its abilities to connect to communications devices easier than they did in the past.

Interview with Brett Bode

Aaron Rothenberger, Advocacy Specialist - Kearney
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Why is it important for public services, including NSTEP, to be available for people with disabilities?

The value of Telecommunications is its ability to help connect people and make it easier to communicate. This applies to all people, so the NSTEP program is a great program that helps improve accessibility for the Nebraska Deaf/HOH/speech impaired/blind community to have access to telecommunications equipment that can help them communicate with the family, friends, and community. I have really enjoyed getting to see the impacts that the NSTEP program has had and is having for this community in the short time I have been here in this role. I have gotten lots of feedback from various individuals I have talked to and it has been nice to see on a personal level the impacts that these programs can have.

What is a fun fact you learned about Nebraska government and the PSC since you started?

Given I have worked in support of Voice services directly over the past 15 years, I am familiar with the State Utility commissions throughout the US. My interaction with them has been specifically in relation to telecommunication details in the past. So, for me what has been fun to learn about so far is the other departments that are part of the Public Service Commission (PSC) and that oversee other industries such as Natural Gas/Oil Pipelines/Railroad safety/Household good movers and passenger carriers/grain warehouses/construction of manufactured and modular homes and recreational vehicles/high voltage electric transmission lines and private water company rates.

Get in Touch with NCDHH!



NCDHH Happenings with Advocates

Kim Davis, Lead Advocacy Specialist - Lincoln

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Our advocates in the community, education, youth and families, and behavioral health fields have been busy this summer with varieties of activities involving advocacy services, presentation, outreach and professional development!

Several of us hosted several Deaf and Hard of Hearing Awareness events as a part of our outreach projects at three different local baseball stadiums and two local zoos. The Scottsbluff regional office held two at the Oregon Trail Park Stadium with their Western Nebraska Pioneers team in Gering and at the Riverside Discovery Center Park and Zoo in Scottsbluff. The Omaha regional office held two at the Werner Park with their Storm Chasers team during the All Abilities Night in Papillion and at the Omaha Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha. And the Lincoln regional office held one at the Haymarket Park with the Lincoln Saltdogs team in Lincoln. Additionally, our Omaha and Lincoln regional offices has collaborated with several state, regional and local government entities that involved enhancing access to communication through digital means. One involved the Douglas County's Emergency Language Alert Network in Omaha with the Douglas County Health Department, World Speaks and Restoring Dignity. The other involved the Nebraska Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program with the Nebraska Broadband Office and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA's) Office of Internet Connectivity and Growth (OICG) in Lincoln.

Be sure to watch for additional upcoming events by following our social media profiles on [NCDHH Facebook](#) or [X.com](#) (formerly Twitter) or by checking our NCDHH website's [Calendar of Events](#). Other alternative NCDHH activities or announcements can be obtained through our E-Communicator (electronic email alerts) and The Communicator (electronic newsletter) by signing up or updating your contact information through our NCDHH website's [Keep In Touch](#) webpage.



Collaborating during our Weekly Advocacy Specialist Collaboration Meeting through Zoom

Top L-R: Kathy Scusa, Kim Davis, and Margie Propp (Interpreter)
Middle L-R: Susan Whitaker, Jeremy Daffern, and Sakura Yodogawa Campbell
Bottom L-R: Ashley Wulf, Katia Castro, and Aaron Rothenberger

Back to School and IEPs

Susan Whitaker, Advocacy Specialist - Scottsbluff
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As we approach the Back-to-School season, this marks a great time to evaluate your student's IEP. Children often change physically, mentally and emotionally during the summer. All these changes can affect a child's IEP. Take time to review your child's IEP and take note of any changes you feel need to be addressed. Schedule a meeting with the team to assess if the IEP is still relevant and effective.

Here are a few tips and reminders as you review their existing IEP:

1. Ask the IEP team how they plan to collect data on your child's progress this year and how will they measure regression. Make sure the standards of the data collection are clear and ambitious. Discussion should also be made as to whether changes are needed due to "present levels", or how last year went.
2. Ask about the W's of your child's services. This includes where, when, who and what. Where will the services happen, when will it happen, who else will be there and what exactly is the service being provided.
3. Review your child's IEP Goals and Objectives. Do you understand how their goals are measured? Is the measurement specific and clear?
4. Make sure every member of the IEP team and every teacher has read the IEP or 504. You would be surprised how many of your child's teachers don't even know they have an IEP. Ask each teacher if they need a copy of the IEP and ask them to read and become familiar with it.
5. Document, document, document! Be sure everything is in writing. This includes phone calls and in-person conversations. Calendars can track due dates, meetings and appointments.
6. Update the teachers on any new behaviors, regressions, or new skills. This gives you a good opportunity to get to know the new teachers. Begin developing that positive relationship with them.
7. Make yourself known and available! Attend as many of the school events as you possibly can. Volunteer in their classroom. Give the teachers positive feedback.
8. Establish effective communication. It is critical that there be open communication between all teachers, IEP team members including the student (if age appropriate). What form of communication works best, email, phone calls or maybe a communication log?

Hopefully these tips and ideas will help you and your child have the most positive and successful year. It's important to start off on the right foot! If you have any other questions or need advocacy, please contact me at susan.whitaker@nebraska.gov, Voice 308-633-3751, or Video Phone 308-225-4697.



How to Support Language Development for Children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

*Ashley Altman, Youth and Family Advocacy Specialist - Statewide
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You have a deaf or hard-of-hearing child, and you are curious about how to support language development. No worries, I am here to provide you with some resources and ideas that provide support for language development. Before I dive into all the ideas and resources, I want to grab an opportunity to talk a bit about why it is important to use those resources and ideas to support your child's language development. There are about 90-95% of children who are deaf/hard of hearing born to a hearing family and 70% of those children do not have access to any language. Research has proven most children who are deaf or hard of hearing thrive when they are exposed to two or more languages since birth. You may be curious about how you can support the language development of your child. You can start exposing language as soon as your baby is born. You can expose them in many ways!

Children can thrive on language by having visual aids that can support them. You can read a book to your child daily using your voice and sign language. There are also resources online with books in American Sign Language and spoken English for the child to watch and listen to. When you use the television in your home, I encourage you to turn on closed captions. This can assist with improving the literacy of your child. Often times the child will learn about new words and social behavior by overhearing conversation from adults. If you have a conversation with your family member you could use both American Sign Language and spoken English to expose the new terms and concepts for your child.

Here are some resources for children in American Sign Language and English:

- [Described and Captioned Media Program](#): *Free membership that will give you access to education videos with access to Close Caption and ASL.*
- [ASL Literacy Activities — VL2 Storybook Apps](#) : *A free interactive storybook and activities apps.*
- [CORE](#): *ASL storytelling.*
- [Rocky Mountain Deaf School](#): *ASL Storybook/Storytelling.*
- [American Society for Deaf Children](#): *ASL Storybook*
- [Unite for Literacy](#): *Access to education storybook in ASL - Click "Narration"*
- [PBS Kids](#): *Educational television episodes in ASL*
- [ASLized](#): *ASL Storybook and Storytelling.*
- [Texas Deaf Education Statewide Outreach Coordinator](#): *ASL Storybook and Storytelling*
- [YouTube](#): *Books and stories in ASL*

If you have any questions or would like more resources or support, please contact me at ashley.altman@nebraska.gov or (402) 206-2544.

Weather & Mood Changing

*Sakura Yodogawa-Campbell - Behavioral Health Coordinator
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It is back to school time and that means that a season change is just around the corner. For those who live with or struggle with their mental health, fall seems to have a huge impact on our mental health. Sadly, for a lot of us, it can be a negative experience.

From the decrease in daylight hours, temperature change, weather (in many places tends to have more rainy and cold days); to trauma history, all can have an impact on how we experience the fall and move into winter.

For many trauma survivors, it becomes a time of reflection or looking inward. This is where Self-Care/Self-Soothing becomes vital to our thriving. I want to share a few quick tips to help you stay grounded during the changing season. These have been such a big help for me over the years.

1. Kick your shoes/socks off and stand in your bare feet. Outside. FEEL the earth. If doing so with your feet is not a thing, then use your hands to touch the earth. Feel the ground. Connect with it. It may seem silly and feel weird the first time you try this, but I have found it to be a great way to stay grounded (literally and figuratively).
2. Indulge in comfort foods! OK, don't overdo it BUT this is the best time to enjoy your comfort foods! What I would give for a heaping bowl of mash right now (mashed potatoes)!! And if Pumpkin Spice is your flavor, then by all means, take comfort in it and revel in all things pumpkin and spice. The perfect feel of fall!
3. Celebrate the change! What a better way to embrace the season change than to celebrate it! Honor the season change by creating your own ceremony or ritual. Bring in some leaves or branches from outside. Paint them or scrapbook them.
4. Pamper yourself! YES! Maybe I am biased, but I totally believe in pampering myself as a great way to self-care. Whether it is getting a massage, a new haircut, get your nails done (yes, males DO get manicures/pedicures) or buy that one outfit you keep putting off. You don't want to overspend or over-indulge, but it is OK to take care of yourself. Sometimes, this is all we need to do to recharge!
5. Random acts of Kindness. We don't do this enough! One way to keep my own spirits up is by lifting others! Surprise a coworker, neighbor or friend with a little note or a cup of coffee. Send an anonymous postcard to a business to thank them for their service. Volunteer as a mentor or to help a neighbor clear up their leaves.

These are just a few ideas that are proven to work (based on my personal research and experiences!!) and will be sure to put a smile on your face. If you have any more questions, please feel free to contact me at sakura.yodogawa@nebraska.gov, Voice 402-613-3869, or Video Phone 402-682-7129.



Disaster Preparedness

Jeremy Daffern, Advocacy Specialist - Omaha
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On July 31, 2024, a group of thunderstorms with very high winds tore through Lincoln and Omaha. This brought down trees, basketball posts, and anything not attached deep enough into the ground. Two hours passed and the weather calmed down and people came out to assess property damages. Many branches and trees were ripped apart, signages were bent, and paneling and roof shingles were ripped off from the houses.

According to Restoring Dignity, Omaha is home to over 50 thousand individuals who speak over 100 different languages. However, many people couldn't communicate with each other due to the power outages and could not find information on where to get help. Douglas County Health Department and World Speaks partnered with Restoring Dignity to set up an Emergency Language Alert Network. Their alert system is focused on sending out emergency information in their native language, other than English. You can sign up for the alerts in your language at <https://rdomaha.org/alerts/>.

Weather is always unpredictable and could happen anytime to anyone. According to the American Red Cross, "Disasters can happen anytime, anywhere. Learn ways to be prepared and stay safe (www.redcross.org)." Being unprepared can put you in various issues. For example, no water bottles for yourself and your family.

There are many ways to prepare yourself. Check the weather notifications, watch the news, buy dried food, stock up water bottles, recharge your hearing aid and portable batteries, and bring your pets inside. Always be prepared, no matter what.

There are many ways to find out about the incoming weather or prepare yourself along with those links:

<https://weather.com/>

<https://www.ketv.com/weather> and several media outlets online.

<https://www.redcross.org/get-help/how-to-prepare-for-emergencies/types-of-emergencies/thunderstorm.html>

<https://nema.nebraska.gov/disaster-preparation.php>

When is it Time to Update Your Hearing Aids?

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For those who are hard of hearing wearing hearing aids, it is important to update your hearing aids at least every three years. Hearing aids can last anywhere from three to seven years. For some people, it may last even longer.

It all depends on how well the hearing instrument is built and maintained. It also affects how much wear and tear it experiences being worn in your ears for many hours a day. As hearing instruments age, they get outdated. Sometimes with age, your hearing may change to the point where it is beyond the range of your current hearing aids. You may need to upgrade to a more powerful instrument or with new hearing capabilities that meet your needs. There will be new demands on your hearing aids depending on changes in your occupation or living situation. Your hearing requirement may change if your job involves working in a noisy environment such as a restaurant or construction site.

I took a hearing test, and I noticed I had significant hearing loss than what I took three years ago. I qualify to request new hearing aids every three years through my health insurance. I updated my hearing aids after three years of wearing Starkey Livio AI 1600. I was able to obtain a much better hearing aid that has Bluetooth capabilities. I am currently wearing Starkey Genesis AI 24s hearing aids, which in my opinion, is the best hearing technology under Starkey within the Genesis AI family. It delivers premium performance. It has longer battery wear and better hearing quality. With my new hearing aids, I hear sounds I'd never heard before, a bird singing, an air conditioner running off and on, cars passing by, and keys dangling. It took me some time to adjust to hearing new sounds.

Hearing technology is always changing. In the past few years, I have seen significant advancements in how hearing aids perform in noisy environments. My hearing aid performance has improved primarily due to improvements in directional microphones. It works by amplifying certain directions more than others. Automatic hearing aids have greatly improved my experience. It can determine if I am in a quiet situation, a noisy environment, or an automobile. Hearing aids will automatically make appropriate adjustments depending on the environment.

Most hearing aids today can wirelessly connect to cellphones, computers, TVs, and other devices. With a Bluetooth-enabled hearing aid, I can hear the phone directly in my hearing aids without ever having to raise the phone in my ear. Hearing aid technology has improved drastically over the past few years. It provides more benefit and satisfaction to hearing aid wearers like me than ever before.

Consider purchasing new hearing devices when:

- Your current hearing aids are over three years old.
- Your hearing aids have visible damage.
- Your hearing aids have already been repaired previously.
- Your hearing loss worsens, or your current hearing aid no longer sufficiently helps.
- Better technology for your type/extent of hearing loss and lifestyle is available.

Contact your health insurance to see if you qualify to get hearing aids. If you can't afford hearing aids and don't have health insurance, you could apply for Hearing Aid Bank. It all depends on your income. Vocational Rehabilitation may help pay for hearing aids depending on your situation through employment retention service. Contact your local audiologist to learn about the latest hearing aid technology that can help improve your hearing.



Be Your Own Best Advocate

Kathy Scusa, Advocacy Specialist - North Platte
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As my job title is “Advocacy Specialist,” one would assume that self-advocacy comes easy for me. Not true! In my role for NCDHH, I work to advocate for others, not myself. Advocating for someone else is so much easier than speaking up on my own behalf. In researching this topic, I have learned a lot that I can apply for myself in my life and work situations.

Hopefully this can help you to be your own best advocate! I too, will continually work to be my own best advocate.

WHAT IS SELF-ADVOCACY?

In the most basic of definitions, self-advocacy is the ability to effectively speak up on your own behalf. It is the ability to understand yourself, your values, your wants, your needs, and your rights. Then having the ability to clearly communicate those needs, values and rights to others. It is the ability to help others understand how they can support you.

Self-advocacy is useful at work, in organizations, school, community, medical appointments, family and so many situations. If you do not have the ability to advocate for yourself, many aspects of your life may suffer. It may lead to anxiety, stress, burn out, and being generally unhappy.

Few people are natural self-advocates. For most of us, self-advocacy is a learned behavior. Not everyone has seen it modeled or had the opportunity to practice it. For one reason or another, many of us don't feel comfortable advocating for ourselves. Not only extraverts and strong communicators are good self-advocates. It's a learned skill that with practice, even introverts and people who are quiet can achieve. Over time and with practice, belief in yourself and belief that your needs are valid and worth fighting for becomes easier. Self Confidence takes time and practice. Notice how many times I say practice! Believe it or not...I fall well into the introvert scale! I continually put myself in positions where I have to push myself outside of my comfort zone. Willingness to do this will help with your own self-advocacy. Self-advocacy raises awareness, if you don't speak up for yourself, chances are that others won't recognize the challenges you are facing. If they don't know, they can't and won't fix the problem.

Self-advocacy is a skill that takes time to perfect. There is a lot of self-reflection to be done. Only you can define your wants, your needs and your values. Only you can perform any situational assessment as to what you need. Then you will begin your research on your rights.

Begin with Self-Reflection: Take time to think about - **What are my values?** Values are individual beliefs that motivate people to act one way or another. They serve as a guide for human behavior. Think about what is important you and know your expectations of others in work, group, community and family situations. The values that are important to me may not be the same for you. Examples of some values are: Honesty, integrity, fairness, trustworthiness, accountability & responsibility.

Spend some time deciding, What matters most to me and why? Now think about What do you need? vs. What do you want vs. what do you believe you deserve? Vs. What are your particular needs? Needs are what you should focus on as a self-advocate.

Be Your Own Best Advocate

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- What do I need to accomplish my tasks or fulfill my responsibilities?
- What do I need to feel respected and to maintain my emotional, physical and financial well-being?

You should also spend some time to consider: What are my strengths and growth areas? Having a grasp on these things will help you to form a cohesive plan when you are asking for something.

To summarize...

- Practice! Practice, then Practice some more!
- Believe in Yourself.
- Communicate your needs.
- Understand the context of your role within the larger group.
- Take Control of Your Emotions.
- Continue developing yourself, by building relationships with others. Build up a support system. Join — and even lead —Connect with like and unlike individuals who are united in building visibility, programming, and policies to support you and others.
- Develop a robust and direct line of communication within your group.
- Be an ally and advocate for others.

Speak Up...Be Assertive... & Advocate for yourself...You Deserve it!

If you would like to discuss my article, anything hearing related or NCDHH's programs and services, please contact me at my North Platte office phone number (308) 535-6600 or you can email me at kathy.scusa@nebraska.gov. I look forward to serving you.

RESOURCES:

<https://www.goodnet.org/articles/how-to-advocate-for-yourself-in-5-steps>

<https://www.betterup.com/blog/self-advocacy>

<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/how-to-advocate-for-yourself>

<https://ece.emory.edu/articles-news/self-advocacy-and-resiliency.php>