

Kentucky Funding of Support Services for Students with Hearing Loss

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Abstract

Kentucky has had state funding for support services for students with hearing loss in higher education mandated by law since 1986. In addition to having resolved the issues about “who pays” for these services, this arrangement has brought about a spirit of collaboration and development of key relationships that have been beneficial in the development of other activities. Also, this initiative has continued to evolve with changes in the law and procedures implementing the law, as needed, to meet the needs of both the postsecondary institutions and the state vocational rehabilitation agency. While this system is not perfect, this arrangement is a “Win/Win” situation for Kentucky, especially for students using these services. The Kentucky Department of Vocational Rehabilitation believes this process meets the requirements of the inter-agency agreement with higher education as mandated by the 1998 Rehabilitation Act Amendments.

History and Background

Kentucky has had state funding for support services to students who are deaf or hard of hearing, which was established by law, since 1986. This was brought about in part because one of the major Kentucky public universities that served the deaf students in the state experienced problems providing needed accommodations. These problems included not having enough funds to pay for interpreters and notetakers, and not having enough qualified interpreters to meet the students’ needs. The deaf students became organized and pursued quality accommodations; and as a result, a state legislator who was affiliated with this university crafted the law that established this state funding.

The law passed in 1986 was prior to the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). The major points of this Kentucky legislation were:

- To increase the educational level of persons with hearing loss by providing equal opportunity to obtain education in institutions of higher education.
- Institutions of higher education would be accessible to students who are deaf and hard of hearing by

providing necessary support services including, but not limited to, interpreters and notetakers.

- These services would be paid by the Kentucky Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (KDVR) for their clients and by state appropriations (administered by the state Council on Higher Education) for non-VR clients.

- Provision of these support services would not be delayed because of any disagreement about who is responsible for payment. The institution would be responsible to provide the services and resolve the disagreement.

- The law also included the requirement for an interpreter training program (ITP) at one (1) institution of higher education leading to at least an AA degree. And, by 1987-88, the ITP would expand to other locations across the state.

At that time, the law required the state VR agency to continue paying for interpreters and notetakers for their clients in higher education, but a new central fund would be established for non-VR clients to be used to reimburse state universities as needed. The central fund started with about \$30,000 per year to be used for these services. Maybe the most significant part of the law was the requirement that Kentucky planned to establish interpreter training programs to address the severe shortage of qualified services.

Amendments to the Law and Other Changes

As previously mentioned, this system in Kentucky has been an evolving process and as a result, the law was amended in 1994. Several areas were addressed:

- Transferred administrative responsibilities for distribution of the state appropriated funds to the Kentucky Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (KDVR).
- Dropped the requirement for vocational rehabilitation funds to be used to pay for these services for students who were also KDVR clients.
- Clarified that reimbursements to institutions of higher education could be a “fee for service” or based on actual costs.

One of the major reasons for these changes was that the higher education entity responsible for distribution of the funding did not have staff with the back-

ground and knowledge of deafness and interpreter services, etc., which resulted in some gaps in services and difficulties assisting institutions to develop quality services. This led to negotiations for KDVR to become the administrator of the state funding for these services with the expectation that assistance and support would be provided to local institutions as needed.

The Kentucky Department of Vocational Rehabilitation agreed to oversee and manage the distribution of the funding if the requirement that KDVR funds had to be used to pay for these services for their clients was dropped. However, KDVR realized that the exact yearly costs for these services were unpredictable and by accepting administrative responsibility, the agency would have to provide additional funding for these services for VR student/clients if there was not enough state funding.

Basically, this has been accomplished by setting up two accounts in KDVR: one for non-KDVR students and one for KDVR student/clients. The state-appropriated funds are always used for non-KDVR students first, to ensure that these needs are met. For state appropriations used for KDVR student/clients, this funding qualifies as state match money to draw down the federal funding for KDVR services. Thus, this aspect is one of the big win/wins for the Kentucky Department of Vocational Rehabilitation.

KDVR, with input from coordinators of services for students who are deaf at state institutions, developed guidelines concerning how the state funding is distributed for interpreter services, notetakers, and other needed support services. These guidelines also include information about state and federal legislation pertinent to these services, qualifications of service providers, and resources to locate qualified interpreters, etc.

In 1998, this Kentucky law was amended again to also provide funding to technical schools; thus the state appropriations were available for all public postsecondary institutions, not just for colleges and universities. This coincided with the state merger of universities, community colleges and technical schools as part of one entity for postsecondary education. KDVR continued to administer this funding to reimburse the postsecondary institutions for support services for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. However, a different reimbursement method had to be developed for the technical school programs.

Win/Win – Kentucky VR and Public Postsecondary Programs

Again, this initiative has been a win/win situation for the Kentucky Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and Kentucky postsecondary education programs. Specific positive outcomes include:

A centralized state fund has been established and increased as needed to address the support services needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing in public postsecondary institutions. This has been ex-

tremely helpful to programs that do not have established services for this population but do occasionally have students who need these accommodations.

Accommodations and services to students who are deaf or hard of hearing are more consistent statewide, which allows for more choices for students.

The issues about ‘who pays’ for interpreter and other accommodations are resolved; the state has basically had an interagency agreement since 1986.

As previously stated, the state funding can be used by KDVR for federal matching funds. KDVR has also been able to track specific costs of accommodations to their student/clients and can use this information when requesting Social Security reimbursement.

VR and postsecondary personnel have developed effective relationships allowing for collaboration to improve services to these students.

After the last amendment to the Kentucky law, the postsecondary programs and KDVR have used a lot of creative ideas to “get the most for our money” and improve services to these students. One of the ideas implemented has been to encourage programs with larger numbers of students who are deaf/hard of hearing to develop yearly program budgets including salaries for staff such as interpreters. This has been more cost effective and has improved the quality of services instead of only reimbursing the postsecondary programs for interpreters for each student after the services have occurred. Additional examples of improved programming were postsecondary institutions that hired tutors and teachers specifically for students who are deaf or hard of hearing and included these costs in their budgets for reimbursement.

Collaboration Between Kentucky VR and Eastern Kentucky Interpreter Training Program

The other part of the original law required the establishment of interpreter training programs in Kentucky. This program was established at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), but the demand for qualified interpreters continued to exceed the availability of trained interpreters. Around 1994, when KDVR became the administrator of this state funding, the agency also decided to develop a separate agreement to provide funding for expansion of the EKU Interpreter Training Program (ITP). This agreement provided short-term funding that has helped the EKU-ITP to grow from a two-year to a four-year degree program and to add a training program at a satellite location.

The collaboration and subsequent relationships have been very successful, resulting in (a) an increased pool of qualified interpreters for VR and postsecondary institutions, (b) projects that improved services to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, and recently, (c) the establishment of a Center on Deafness through Eastern Kentucky University. In addition to VR and

EKU, several state agencies and other organizations have become partners in the Center on Deafness with the purpose of sharing available data and resources to conduct joint projects to improve existing and/or create new programs as needs are identified.

The Center on Deafness has employed a grant writer who works with all partners. Recently the Center on Deafness was successful in getting a federal Technology Opportunities Program (TOP) grant to establish remote video conferencing shared by several agencies to improve service delivery and provide accessibility for individuals who are deaf.

Future Plans and/or Needs

The state funding for support services is only for public postsecondary institutions. Private postsecondary institutions in Kentucky do not have access to this funding when students who are deaf or hard of hearing attend these programs. In the past, the state VR agency has negotiated, as needed, a shared arrangement for payment of interpreters or notetakers, but increased costs of these services have made this process more difficult. As always, there is the continued need for more qualified interpreters in postsecondary settings. Other parts of the state want to expand interpreter training programs to meet the needs in their areas.

Finally, there is always a concern about continuation and increase of funding as needed to meet the need for these services. Kentucky has been fortunate to receive increased funding for these services during each state budget cycle. This funding, which began around \$30,000 per year in 1986 is now over \$1,000,000 per year. As more students utilize print access such as captioning, there is concern about the funding level meeting the demand for services.

However, the real key to success at the postsecondary level for many students who are deaf or hard of hearing may lie in the development of more comprehensive programs that address all of their transition needs, not only reasonable accommodations. This will require the collaboration and resources of KDVR, postsecondary institutions and many other programs.

Again, and in summary, this Kentucky legislation to fund support services for students who are deaf or hard of hearing appears to be working in this state and has resulted in many positive projects and activities between postsecondary programs and vocational rehabilitation. As other states grapple with how to meet the requirements of developing interagency agreements to decide who pays for these costs, legislation and/or requests for funding may be another option to explore at the state level.