

Laying the Foundation for the New Jersey Deaf Mentor Program

Pamela Aasen, B.Ed, DAUS, M.Ed

Alyssa Buchholz, B.A.

Early Hearing Detection & Intervention (EHDI) Mentoring & Family Engagement Project, SPAN Parent Advocacy Network

Nancy G. Schneider, M.A., CCC-A, FAAA

New Jersey Early Hearing Detection & Intervention Program (EHDI), New Jersey Department of Health

Learning Objectives

1. Familiarize EHDI stakeholders with New Jersey's first and only Deaf Mentor Program
2. Illustrate the services/roles of ASL Deaf Mentors versus Snapshots D/HH Mentors
3. Describe New Jersey's Deaf Mentor Program initiatives in meeting the challenging accessibility needs of families

NJ's First Deaf Mentor Program

JCIH reaffirms the need to provide families with individualized support and information specific to language and communication development to support children who are D/HH by providing exposure to language models at the earliest possible age to ensure optimal cognitive, emotional, and educational development. (JCIH, 2019).

The SPAN Parent Advocacy Network, in collaboration with the NJ EHDI Program, established NJ's first Deaf Mentor Program (DMP) in 2019 through federal (HRSA) and NJ State funding (Leveling The Playing Field). Services include mentorship by Deaf and/or hard of hearing (D/HH) adults trained with the SKI-HI curriculum. The DMP was further supported through consultation with the NJ School for the Deaf, NJ Department of Education, and the NJ Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NJ Department of Human Services). The DMP Advisory Board made up of over 30 hearing, Deaf and hard of hearing, and Deafblind stakeholders representing state and local agencies who have an interest in children with hearing loss meets biannually to review progress on DMP grant deliverables and make recommendations for improvements to the program.



Deaf Mentor Training

JCIH, 2019 reaffirms the need to provide families with individualized support and information specific to language and communication development to support children who are deaf or hard of hearing by providing exposure to language models at the earliest possible age to ensure optimal cognitive, emotional, and educational development. Families should be encouraged to consult with their early intervention team, other specialists (e.g., audiologists, speech-language pathologists, ASL or other sign language specialists, adults who are deaf or hard of hearing, physicians), their child's health care provider and other parents of children who are deaf or hard of hearing throughout the decision-making process. (JCIH, 2019).

NJ was the first state to offer both types of mentor services certified by SKI HI: ASL Deaf Mentors (ASLDMs) and Snapshots D/HH Mentors (SDHHM). Two separate trainings each have been held in NJ for each of these DM groups with follow up, post-certification trainings also provided. All DMs are provided stipends for meeting with families, attending additional training, and participating in family events.

"I absolutely believe that this training is a life-changing experience!! Definitely a MUST!"
-SPAN ASL Deaf Mentor



Group picture from SKI-HI training

"I'm so appreciative of this program. I feel that it has helped us rocket forward with our progress in learning sign. For our little (girl) we feel like we are learning how to help her navigate in a hearing world. Thank you for this program!"
-Parent

Program Launch

An in-person kick-off event to introduce the DMP to families was held in June of 2019 at Kidz Village, a family-friendly, language-rich venue to introduce the DMP to families from throughout NJ. 25 families registered, 20 families attended. SPAN Staff, NJ EHDI and NJ DDHH representatives, ASLDMs, Snapshots D/HH Mentors, certified sign language interpreters, including deaf/blind interpreters, and Spanish translators attended the event along with the families. 5 families were immediately matched to mentors to begin in-person home visits.



Kick-off Event at Kidz Village

"The families I teach are all wonderful and I love seeing the smiles and children's faces light up. It truly makes this experience so much more enjoyable."
-SPAN ASL Deaf Mentor

Services Provided

The deaf and hard-of-hearing community includes members with direct experience with signed language, spoken language, hearing aid and cochlear implant use, and other communication strategies and technologies. (JCIH, 2007). Moeller, et al., 2013 and JCIH, 2013 (as cited in JCIH, 2019) concluded that access to deaf or hard of hearing adults can support caregivers in fostering the child's emerging self-esteem and identity formation.

The NJ DMP is a free program for NJ families with a child with hearing loss in one or both ears who are under the age of 5 years. There are 2 types of mentors available to families in NJ: ASL Deaf Mentors (ASLDMs) and Snapshots D/HH Mentors (SD/HHMs).

ASLDMs are culturally Deaf adults, trained to provide regularly scheduled ASL instruction and introduce families to Deaf Culture and the Deaf Community. All ASL DM candidates are required to take the Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI) and score Superior or Superior Plus.

Snapshots D/HH Mentors are a culturally diverse group of adults presenting with a range of hearing losses and communication modalities who meet with families to share their first-hand experiences via the Snapshots curriculum over six sessions per fiscal year.

Both adults and children in the deaf and hard-of-hearing community can enrich the family's experience by serving as mentors and role models. Such mentors have experience in negotiating their way in a hearing world, raising infants or children who are deaf or hard of hearing, and providing families with a full range of information about communication options, assistive technology, and resources that are available in the community. (JCIH, 2007)

Opportunities are also provided for families to meet DMs during virtual and in-person family events offered by NJ D/HH organizations.

Through the onboarding process, families are offered a referral to the NJ Parent to Parent program which offers parents the opportunity to connect with trained support parents of children with hearing loss.
<https://spanadvocacy.org/programs/p2p/>



Deaf Mentor Jeffrey working with one of our children

"My husband and I love our meetings with our Deaf Mentor! She is so nice and positive. Always a great time!"
-Parent

Resources for Families

Programs should ensure that these opportunities are available and can be delivered to families through a variety of communications means, such as Web sites, e-mail, newsletters, videos, retreats, picnics and other social events, and educational forums for parents. (JCIH, 2007)

Information and resources are provided to families via a YouTube Channel, Facebook Group, quarterly newsletters, and supplemental online lessons. The NJDMP's journey evolved from NJ's first DM program to one that has grown to meet the needs of NJ's culturally diverse families of children with hearing loss through the implementation of creative strategies for family access.

Videos

A promotional video, testimonial videos, social media videos clips, and individual DM video introductions are available for families to familiarize themselves with the program and mentors. The videos can be viewed using the following QR Code:



"The more consistently we work with our Deaf Mentor the more confident I've become in using ASL."
-Parent

Accessibility

JCIH, 2019 advocates for the provision of services through innovative methods such as telehealth resulting in more timely access and reduction of barriers that impact outcomes.

Distance technology was planned early in program development to provide accessibility to a mentor for families that did not live in close proximity to a mentor. Matching mentors to non-English speaking families was also a barrier identified for families in NJ. Offering virtual visits through available distance technology, Facebook and Zoom, with families and implementing the use of a trilingual interpreter successfully addressed these challenges. The transition to virtual visits was further hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Funding designated for mileage was used to purchase duplicate materials for mentors and families to better engage and build rapport with the child and family during online instruction.

"I am grateful that we are still allowed to continue the Deaf Mentorship through a virtual platform. It actually makes us become more creative and I've had successful sessions!"
-SPAN ASL Deaf Mentor



Deaf Mentor Karen working with a family virtually

Professional Outreach

Appropriate interdisciplinary intervention programs for infants with hearing loss and their families should be provided by professionals who are knowledgeable about childhood hearing loss. Intervention programs should recognize and build on strengths, informed choices, traditions and cultural beliefs of the families. Parents, often in partnership with people who are deaf and hard of hearing, have also participated in the training of professionals. (JCIH, 2007)

Interactive webinars describing NJ's DMP have been presented to NJ licensed audiologists and hearing aid dispensers as part of the NJ EHDI Pediatric Hearing Health Care Webinar series. The information has also been presented to D/HH stakeholders in NJ and at conferences across that state.

References

Joint Committee on Infant Hearing. (2007). Year 2007 Position Statement: Principles and guidelines for Early Hearing Detection and Intervention programs. Pediatrics, 120(4), 898-921. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2007-2333>

Joint Committee on Infant Hearing. (2013). Supplement to the JCIH 2007 position statement: Principles and guidelines for early intervention after confirmation that a child is deaf or hard of hearing. Pediatrics, 131(4), e1324-e1349. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-0008>

Joint Committee on Infant Hearing. (2019). Year 2019 Position Statement: Principles and Guidelines for Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Programs. Journal of Early Hearing Detection and Intervention, 4(2), 1-44. <https://doi.org/10.15142/jptk-b748>

Moeller, M.P., Carr, G., Seaver, L., Stredler-Brown, A., & Holzinger, D. (2013). Best practices in family-centered early intervention for children who are deaf or hard of hearing: An international consensus statement. The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, 18(4), 429-445. <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/ent034>

Watkins, S., Pittman, P., & Walden, B. (1998). The deaf mentor experimental project for young children who are deaf and their families. American Annals of the Deaf, 143(1), 29-34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aad.2012.0098>