Deafblind Communication
Information for Emergency Responders
What is Deafblindness?

- A combination of blindness or vision impairment and hearing loss so severe most speech cannot be understood without amplification
- The dual sensory loss is affecting one or more life activities
The standard DARS DBS uses in determining disability coding for Deafblindness as stated in the Helen Keller Act of 2012:
http://www.hknc.org/WhoWeServeDefinition.htm

The children’s program is slightly more broad in its definition due to the progressive nature of many syndromes and conditions, as well as the educational and functional implications of dual sensory impairment.

Data from the 2010 Deafblind Census shows Texas to be home to more than 2000 people who are Deafblind.
Deafblind Services in Texas

- Employment
- Communication Systems
- Sign Language
- Adaptive Equipment
- Training
- Community Resources
Coverage Areas

DEPARTMENT OF ASSISTIVE AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES
DIVISION FOR BLIND SERVICES

Deafblind Specialist Service Areas

Specialists:
ANGIE HALL - Austin, Tyler, Waco
angie.hall@dars.state.tx.us   512-377-0573

SUSAN STARNES - El Paso, Harlingen, San Antonio
susan.starnes@dars.state.tx.us  512-377-0572

JACKIE SOUHRADA - Corpus, Houston, Southeast
jackie.souhrada@dars.state.tx.us  513-377-0575

CC DAVIS - Dallas, Fort Worth, Lubbock
cc.davis@dars.state.tx.us  214 378-2645

Supervisor: RACHEL SIMPSON
rachel.simpson@dars.state.tx.us  512-377-0566

*Stars = Field Headquarters
*Doors = Field Offices
Who is Deafblind?

- Deafblindness affects everyone: Complications due to prematurity, Syndromes, Injuries, and age-related hearing and vision loss are all causes of Deafblindness.
- The leading cause of Deafblindness in the United States is age-related hearing and vision loss. Usher Syndrome is the most common genetic cause of Deafblindness.
Who is Deafblind, Cont.

- Most of DB Services’ referrals involve people who still have some vision and hearing.
- Most individuals who are Deafblind had vision in the past and use visual memory to assimilate information.
- Individuals may be deafblind, deaf with low vision, or hard of hearing with any kind of vision loss.
Touch

- Touch is how a totally Deafblind person communicates and learns about the world.
- Physical touch is generally more accepted for totally Deafblind, but not as much for a person who still has vision.
- If the Deafblind person is deaf, touch them lightly on the shoulder to gain their attention.
Modes of Communication

- American Sign Language (ASL), Pidgin Signed English (PSE), Signed Exact English (SEE)
  - *Tactile
  - *Tracking
  - *Box/Frame
  - *Close Vision
  - *Finger Spelling
Modes of Communication cont.

- Lighting considerations
- Skill level—newly Deafblind people may not know these techniques
- Progressive loss may require changing communication modes
- Adaptive technology, pictures/symbols
Interpreters

- When requesting an interpreter be sure to give as much information as possible about the Deafblind person’s communication.
- It is especially important to mention if a tactile interpreter is needed.
- You may need a Deaf Intermediary Interpreter if the person with Deafblindness has cognitive/language challenges.
Communication Tips

- Allow more time for communication
- Speak directly to the Deafblind person, not the interpreter
- Identify yourself and take turns speaking
- Keep in mind the Deafblind person cannot take notes or observe an object and maintain receptive/expressive communication
Tips, cont.

- Do not assume the deafblind person knows where they are or what is going on. Share as much information as possible.
- Always tell the person when you are leaving, even if it is for a brief period of time. Leave them as comfortable and safe as possible. It is good to offer them a chair, table, or wall for an anchor.
- When guiding a person who is deafblind never place him/her ahead of you. Allow the person to hold your arm above the elbow. It is rarely necessary to “help” the deafblind person sit down or climb stairs; placing their hand on a chair or banister will give them the information they need.
Keep it Simple

- Emergency = Get out FAST
- Disaster = Stay home unless you are told to evacuate
- Red Flag = High fire danger, Earthquake = Ground shaking, Hurricane = high wind, high water, etc.
- Pictures
Cultural Considerations

- Deaf Culture is visual (more talk about appearance—good and bad), more direct/blunt, share more personal information, solicits personal information from others
- Hearing Culture—individualism, privacy, personal space, indirect, multi-tasking
What if there is no interpreter?

- Communication Cards
- Pen and Paper
- Print on Palm
- Screen Braille Communicator/Similar Technology
- Fingerspelling
- Is Speech an option?
Many, but not all, residential facilities use the universal “X” on the back of a Deafblind person.

The “X” signifies emergency and we need to move now! Talk/explain later.

The “X” is used at HKNC, Deafblind Apts, group homes serving Deafblind.
Some Deafblind people use alerting equipment with amplification, flashers/strobes, and vibrating receivers and bed shakers. Examples include:

* Smoke detectors
* CO2 detectors
* Severe weather alert radios
* Door/window access transmitters
Texas School for the Blind, for example, has stringent systems in place with fire captains, planned and posted routes, monthly drills, students assigned to be buddies to more vulnerable dorm mates. Staff responsible for students 24/7
DB Residential Emergency Plans cont.

- DB Apts in Austin conducts fire safety checks in apartments, staff are assigned for safety of certain consumers, Buddy system, training on calling for help—9-1-1, office on-call staff, other friend/relative, “X” on back
- Hands-On and HKNC—Staff on duty 24/7, “X” on back
Resource for Deafblind Telecommunication Access

- ICanConnect—The National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program
  Designed for low-income individuals who have combined hearing and vision to access telephone, advanced communications and information services.

To learn more:
ICanConnect.org or 1–800–825–4595
Calling for Help

- Video Phone/Relay Service—Can call 9–1–1 through relay
- TTY
- Not yet able to be notified via text or vp of widespread notifications
- Emergencyemail.org
Ensure access to communication—ADA

Are there other considerations, i.e., cognitive

If you are alone and need to communicate, try print on palm, show a tactile symbol such as a badge—anything to let the Deafblind person know they are safe

“X” on back—chances are the Deafblind person has experienced this along the way and will remember it means emergency!
Emergency...what need?

- Hearing aid or cochlear implant batteries
- Extra hearing aids (if you have them)
- Sunglasses
- Extra pair of glasses and/or other optical aids
- Mobility cane (extra pair if you need/have one)
- Batteries and charger for pagers or cell phones
- Note pad and pen for communication (have dark felt tip pen and high contrast paper handy if you use them)
- Communication cards describing the best way to communicate with you
- Braille communication cards (if you use them)
- Business cards of SSPs, interpreters, service agencies
- Food, water and medicine for guide dogs or other service animals or pets
Toolkit Link

- FUNCTIONAL NEEDS SUPPORT SERVICES TOOLKIT
Texas FNSS Tool Kit

Tab J – Effective Communications
Attachment 1 – Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities, Functional and Access needs during a Disaster
Attachment 2 – Talk boards
Attachment 3 – Pictograms
Attachment 4 – Signage
Attachment 5 – Basic Emergency Sign Language & Deafblind Guidelines
Tips for Interacting with People with Disabilities, Access and Functional Needs During Disasters
Talkboards, Pictograms & Signage
Additional Toolkit Guidance

- Low Vision Font Sizes
- Plain English
- High Tech/ Low Tech
- Video Remote Interpreting Providers and Hardware/Software specifications
- Relay Service descriptions
- Use People First Language
Media Broadcasts

- Live Broadcast Briefings by Emergency Managers to the Public with real-time captioning
- Sign language interpreter within the camera frame
- Describe visual information for listeners who are blind or have low vision.
DARS Deafblind Resource Specialists

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Dots = Field Offices
Deaf and Hard of Hearing Resource Specialists

Panhandle (I)
Big Country / Red River (II)
Greater Metroplex (III)
Piney Woods (IV)

Golden Triangle / Southeast (V)
Houston / Gulf Coast (VI)
Hill Country / Brazos Valley (VII)
South Central (VIII)

Permian Basin (IX)
Upper Rio Grande (X)
Lower Rio Grande (XI)

DHHS Specialist Program
Deafness Resource Specialists (DRS) and Hearing Loss Resource Specialists (HLRS)
Effective Communication

- Preparedness & Operational Guidance Videos (Shelter)
- Effective Communication Toolkit (April 2013)
  - Traditional media
  - Social media
  - Notification and Warning
  - Preparedness Messaging
  - Section 508/ Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0) Standards
  - High Tech/ Low Tech Communication Solutions
To contact the Deafblind Services Unit directly email us at deafblindservices@dars.state.tx.us or call (512) 377–0566 (Voice/TTY) and (512) 410–1524 (VP).