

## Deaf-Blindness in Colorado

### How Many Coloradans are Deaf-Blind?

Accurate data on Deaf-Blindness is not currently gathered at the state or national level, so it is not known exactly how many people in The United States are Deaf-Blind. However, we can make both low and high estimates based on available recent data from a number of sources. Using Colorado Community Inclusion Data, Helen Keller National Center, and 2010 and 2014 US Census estimates, we estimate the number of Deaf-Blind people in Colorado at **approximately 5,000, rising to more probable 21,000 people** when including adults who have lost their vision and hearing due to aging. The wide gulf between these low and high estimates highlights the need for accurate data on Deaf-Blindness in Colorado.

### Are most Deaf-Blind People born that way?

Approximately 10% of the general population has a hearing loss from birth or during their early or mid-adulthood. Approximately 1% of that group is also blind or has serious vision loss, from birth or during their early or mid-adulthood. In Colorado, this is approximately 5,000 people. Adults who lose vision and/or hearing due to aging therefore represent the majority of the estimated 21,000 deaf-blind people in Colorado. A small portion of the low-end estimate of 5,000 deaf-blind people are children under 18, but the majority are adults not served through the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind in Colorado Springs.

### How Do Deaf-Blind People Communicate?

Deaf-blind individuals use a wide range of communication styles that include American Sign Language (ASL), Tactile ASL (TASL), finger spelling, print on palm, braille, text to speech, and voice. In addition, communication is augmented by personal listening devices, hearing aids and cochlear implants. Assistive technology such as video phones, tablets with large print text, braille displays combined with smart phones, computers with software to magnify text or convert text to speech or braille can expand the individual's ability to communicate. Other tools such as FM and other amplification systems, CART services (Onscreen real-time large print typing of communication that is taking place) or sign language interpreters using specialized techniques improve communication in various settings.

### Is there a Deaf-Blind Culture the way there is a Deaf Culture?

No. Many deaf-blind people lose their vision and/or hearing due to aging, because deaf-blindness affects people in a broad variety of ways and at different times in their lives, and because deaf-blind people use a variety of communication methods, there is less of a distinct culture of deaf-blindness than there is a culture of deafness.

### What kind of Lives do Deaf-Blind People Lead?

The most common experience shared by people who are Deaf-Blind is isolation from meaningful contact with others, a persistent struggle to accomplish many of the tasks of daily life that most people take for granted, chronic underemployment, and poverty. In Colorado, there are still very few services available for deaf-blind individuals, and many deaf-blind people are still unaware of the services that do exist and for which they might be eligible.

### How can we create equal opportunities for deaf-blind Coloradans to lead independent lives?

In truth, deaf-blind people *can* be self-sufficient, hold jobs, pay taxes, own homes, raise families, engage with the larger community, and contribute to society in unique and enriching ways, provided they have access to some very basic supports. Many other states have already asked this question and come to the same conclusion: There are four important types of services that can increase the independence of Deaf-Blind people:

- **Assistive technology** for communication with others and safe interaction with the environment.
- **Interpreters and Support Service Providers (SSPs)** to enable communication with other people and to navigate physical and social environments.
- **Orientation and Mobility training** to teach deaf-blind people how to navigate safely on public and other transportation; and
- **Employment and Housing supports** such as skills training, reasonable accommodations in the workplace and assistance finding and keeping appropriate housing,

The Colorado Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has begun to implement some of these services including management of Colorado's National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program, a growing

program of Support Service providers and the start of Orientation and Mobility training program. Our state is well on its way to becoming a place where people experiencing the combined disability of hearing and vision impairment can get what they need to break out of isolation and become active contributing members of society. As Americans, we are defined by our diversity, and it is what makes this country and Colorado great. By funding and supporting these basic services, by enabling deaf-blind people to access the same opportunities other people have, deaf-blind individuals become active contributors to the greatness of Colorado.

Interested in Learning More?

This fact sheet was created by the Colorado Deaf-Blind Task Force, which is an all-volunteer group of deaf-blind Coloradans who encompass the most common types and experiences of deaf-blindness. For more information, please contact

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