



OPEN LETTER

September 12, 2024

Dear DeafBlind Community and Allies,

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) stands in solidarity with the DeafBlind community in their call for authentic representation at the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC). We recognize the critical importance of DeafBlind leadership in organizations serving the DeafBlind community.

Authentic representation has long been a goal of the Deaf community and significant milestones have been achieved. Our journey began with the establishment of NAD as our own advocacy organization, specifically trained and knowledgeable to combat resistance to our Deaf community's existence. A foundation like this laid the groundwork for decades of transformative change. The Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University marked a pivotal moment, demonstrating the power of self-advocacy and leadership. We've witnessed an increasing presence of Deaf educators in ASL and Deaf education programs, enhancing the quality of education for Deaf individuals. More recently, the community called for recognition of the language deprivation pandemic impacting millions of Deaf people worldwide, leading to increased awareness and action among decision-makers. Another milestone was achieved when the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf appointed its first Deaf president, further solidifying the principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us" in our professional organizations. These achievements have not only empowered our community but have also significantly improved the quality of services and education provided to Deaf individuals. Each step forward reinforces the transformative power of self-representation and authentic leadership within the Deaf community.

It is with this historical context and understanding that we express our deep concern regarding HKNC's recent appointment of a hearing-sighted individual as executive director, especially given the promise made a decade ago to select a DeafBlind leader for this role. This decision overlooks the wealth of qualified DeafBlind candidates and perpetuates a cycle of marginalization that we, as a Deaf community, have long fought against.

We firmly believe that DeafBlind individuals possess the unique lived experiences, cultural competence, and leadership capabilities necessary to guide HKNC effectively. The DeafBlind community, like the Deaf community, thrives when led by those who intimately understand its needs, challenges, and aspirations.

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The NAD calls upon HKNC and Helen Keller Services to:

1. Reconsider their decision and prioritize the appointment of a qualified DeafBlind individual as executive director of HKNC.
2. Implement a transparent process for separating HKNC from Helen Keller Services, ensuring its autonomy.
3. Establish a DeafBlind-led Board of Trustees to govern HKNC, reflecting the principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us."

We commend the DeafBlind Leadership NOW network for their advocacy efforts and stand ready to support their cause. Their demands align with the fundamental values of self-determination and authentic representation that our community holds dear.

To our allies in government, education, and the broader disability rights movement: we urge you to join us in supporting the DeafBlind community's call for leadership that truly represents them. Let us work together to ensure that HKNC, a vital resource for the DeafBlind community, is led by those it serves.

The NAD remains committed to fostering a society where all DeafBlind individuals have equal opportunities for leadership and self-representation. We believe that by supporting DeafBlind leadership at HKNC, we are not only advancing equity but also ensuring the highest quality of services for the DeafBlind community.

Together, let us continue the journey towards true representation and empowerment for all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Rose', is written over a faint, light blue circular watermark that contains the NAD logo.

Lisa Rose, President

cc: NAD Board of Directors
State Associations and Organizational Affiliates