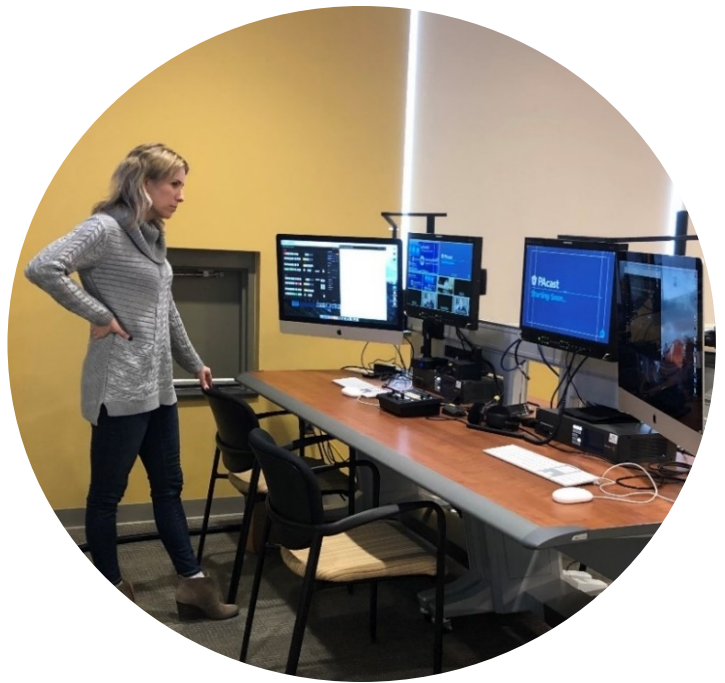


Meet Melissa Hawkins

Director for the Office for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing

Tell us about your career journey.

My career journey is wild! I worked as a vet technician in college and was studying to be a marine biologist. Of course you don't exactly see me saving the whales! I did a career change to behavior science and studied human resources and adult education in graduate school. I worked in HR for seven years before switching to the field of disability services. I have never looked back. In my previous job as Executive Director of a Center for Independent Living, I met so many incredible people at the Commonwealth. I knew it was the perfect place to work to help people. I am so happy to work with L&I. I have met so many incredible people!



What do you like best about your job?

I love my job! I love working to provide advocacy for everyone who is deaf, hard of hearing or DeafBlind. It's not always an accessible world. I'd like to think the hard work my team and I put in makes it better. When I get to educate others on making things more accessible for those who can't hear, it's really a powerful moment for me. Accessibility is something we don't always think about. I'd love to see it become second nature and the world become more universally accessible.

Who or what has helped you succeed in your career journey?

There are so many people who have had such an impact on my career. I don't think I could begin to name all of them. My parents have been a tremendous support always. They both retired from the Commonwealth themselves. My family has supported me 100 percent through all the challenges and transitions. I am lucky to have a great coworker, Jill Moriconi, to look to for support when things get challenging. Ryan Hyde has been a tremendous mentor. I think, as a person with a disability, having faith in yourself is very important. You can't succeed or go far without having faith in yourself.

What advice do you have for job seekers with disabilities?

Don't be afraid to change your path and never be afraid to ask for help. It's ok to admit things aren't easy. We all have different challenges, but only we (ourselves) know what we need to succeed.

This year's NDEAM theme is Access to Good Jobs for All. What is one action you think others can do to help make a difference in this space?

Not being so turned away by accessibility! It can be a lot to think about when you look at many types of accessibility needs written into a best practice guideline, but it's so important to use them. It makes everything more welcoming and more inclusive. Be aware of accessibility needs and open to having them/providing them. We aren't a "one size fits all" and we all want to be able to contribute.