

7200 Spring Mill Street
Concord, VA 23538

October 13, 2021

Amy Barnett
President
Speech-Language-Hearing Association of Virginia (SHAV)
700 McKnight Park Drive, Suite 708
Pittsburgh, PA 15237

Dear Ms. Barnett:

Subject: Retaining the ability to attend the 2022 SHAV Conference virtually

Compared to the previous year, the 2021 SHAV Conference general attendance increased by 75%. Moreover, the total number of professionals presenting at this conference was double the average of invited presenters for the same conferences over the last five years.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, conferences switching to virtual attendance have seen a profound increase in attendance and participation. This increase has also led to many additional positive outcomes impacting conference hosts, presenters, and attendees. Virtual attendance for the 2021 SHAV Conference caused a 20% increase in the number of guest speakers. Following an independent, post-conference survey of the presenters, survey participants indicated that attending virtually was one of the principal factors in their decision to present at the conference. This change also allowed for the increase and inclusivity of speakers. The 2021 SHAV Conference observed its highest recorded participation of out-of-state speakers to date. This increase also led to a greater variety of sources and topics offered through the conference's seminars.

A separate, independent exit poll following the 2021 SHAV Conference found that attendees experienced the most benefits from having the conference implement a virtual design. Participants saved an average of \$750 for typical lodging expenses. Professionals who attended virtually also saved an average of 12 hours of traveling time. Furthermore, demographic data on attendees exhibited increased attendance in groups outside of practicing professionals including students, ethnic minorities, and individuals with disabilities. Attendance increases for these groups were due to related benefits of virtual attendance including reduction of costs as well as ease of access.

Given the positive attributes associated with virtual attendance during the 2021 SHAV Conference, virtual attendance serves as a viable option for improving involvement and participation within conferences. Specifically, deciding to permit virtual attendance at the 2022 SHAV Conference would allow participants to continue to enjoy the benefits experienced during the 2021 SHAV Conference. Consequently, I ask that SHAV allow a virtual attendance option for the upcoming 2022 SHAV Conference.

While it is important to acknowledge that we are in a different place than in the spring of 2021, the continued prevalence of COVID-19 and at-risk participants necessitates consideration for these populations which contribute significantly to the equality, inclusion, and future of our field. As an individual who has a physical disability and has experienced the difficulties of traveling, I can personally attest to how a virtual attendance option would aid individuals with disabilities. The virtual attendance option even played a profound role in my decision to attend a conference that I otherwise would not have been able to attend due to time constraints as well as my physical abilities. Virtual attendance would not only allow for greater participation among minority groups but also serve as a means by which SHAV could increase the participation of diverse populations and create a more inclusive field.

I humbly ask that you please publish a formal announcement of SHAV's intention to allow virtual attendance for the 2022 conference before the reservation portal opens on December 31st. Making this announcement will allow individuals to avoid reserving a spot thinking only in-person attendance was allowed. This early announcement would also show that SHAV is taking proactive steps for permitting greater inclusion and participation among its diverse members.

I personally thank you for your time and attention.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Holden Allen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Holden Allen

The following is a description of context. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Speech-Language-Hearing Association of Virginia (SHAV) moved their annual state conference to an online virtual platform. With COVID-19 restrictions being lessened as compared to the ones implemented during the spring of 2021, SHAV has decided to return to in-person attendance for the upcoming 2020 SHAV conference. As detailed in the above letter, I am asking the president of SHAV to allow for virtual attendance. I have taken this specific position on premise that allowing virtual attendance would offer a number of benefits to both the host, individuals presenting at the conference, and attendees.