Tuntosarvi

The Finnish Deafblind Association

2026



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Front cover: Young members from Turku enjoying physical activity together with an instructors.

Back cover: Hilkka Hyötylä enjoys the Sensory garden at the Resource Center for the Deafblind.

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Active Organisation for the deafblind and visual and hearing impaired people

The Finnish Deafblind Association (FDBA) has been active for 50 years as a national implementer of issues and services for the deafblind and visual and hearing-impaired living in Finland. The association is an active community controlled by deafblind members. There are over 400 members in Finland. In addition, the association offers flexible services to over 900 customers.

The association employs about 75 people, most of whom are in housing and rehabilitation services. Deafblind people living in different parts of Finland receive help from the organisation's network of service experts. ICT services offer the helpdesk's remote service to all deafblind people living around the country. ICT training is carried out for members and other customers benefiting from the service at the Resource Center for the Deafblind in Tampere. Rehabilitation of adults and children is also carried out there by a competent multi-professional work group.

The Resource Center for the Deafblind also provides housing services and a group home, where services are offered to deafblind customers who need round-the-clock care and varied help.

Club and hobby activities carried out by the members themselves are organised throughout the country.

All services are implemented both for sign language users and those who can use speech. The association organises communication and deafblind training for employees, deafblind people, interpreters, social and health students, and healthcare workers.

The board of the association makes the decisions. Board members are deafblind and communicate either via speech or sign language.

The association's activities are financed by society and by service production, of which the sale of services to municipalities is significant.

The association offers vibrant and varied activities which enjoy ample participation from its members.

Chairperson **Timo Lehtonen**



Accessible facilities for deafblind

Text: Milla Lindh
Pictures: The Finnish Deafblind Association

The Resource Center for the Deafblind is located in Hervanta, Tampere (Finland). It has grown from a few buildings in the early 80s to a modern flagship of accessibility. VTS Ristontalo was completed in the early spring of 2017. During the construction pro ject, the old workspace building on the site was renovated, and the accommodation facilities for rehabilitation were renovated in 2018. The centre of the site holds a sensory garden, which was built jointly by many entities devoted to deafblindness. In 2013, a summer kitchen and a dining shelter were completed as a joint effort of the Lions Clubs of Pirkanmaa.

Users involved in planning

In 2017, VTS Ristontalo was completed next to the The Resource Center for the Deafblind. Its completion process can be freely copied to start any construction project.

User groups were already involved in the planning process. Meetings were arranged for the future residents with the active involvement of the archi tect who designed the building. Besides residents, experts included sign-language seniors, representatives of the board of The *Finnish Deafblind Association* and employees working with deafblind people. The architect brought suggestions and solutions to the meetings.

Furthermore, benchmark visits were conducted by a working group – consisting of deafblind people, sign-language speakers and employees – which visited more than ten different serviced housing units. Everyone was able to see what solutions were available for housing, furnishing and access routes, and which of them were suitable for the deafblind. The working group also visited the furniture manufacturers.



Accessible facilities

During construction, the builder undertook to check the details, which were visited several times with the deafblind. Examples include the heights of the shower seats attached to the walls, the placement of handrails in washrooms, and the testing of different threshold alternative conditions.

Through the entire project, **Timo Siiskonen**, who worked as the Chief Architect, amassed ample knowledge about both deafblindness and building accessible environments for the deafblind. Many details came directly from the wishes of the deafblind, for which the architect cleverly sought solutions.





Examples:

- Kitchen cabinets opening gently upwards. You should not hit your head on an open closet door.
- Threshold drains and non-slip floors in all wet areas. There will be no puddles on the floor, and they won't slip even if a single drop of shampoo falls on the floor.
- Kitchen taps close automatically.
- The communal sauna in the house has a steam generation button on the wall. By pressing the button next





to the shelf on the wall, the system pours the appropriate amount of water directly onto the stove. If the stove location cannot be felt, steam water might end up somewhere other than the stove itself.

- There are no pillars to bump into outside the house and balconies are embedded in the frame.
- Apartment doors on each floor open inwards so you cannot run into an open door.
- The house's interior colour scheme features solid contrasts. Doors and doorways stand out clearly from the walls.
- Opposite corridor walls feature different finishes. When two deafblind people stop in the corridor for a chat, and a third deafblind person joins them, the sense of direction is easily lost. By touching the wall, I know that having the rougher wall on my left means I am walking towards my apartment.



- Lighting is both direct and indirect light and does not dazzle. The lighting in Ristontalo's dining room and the multi-purpose room connected to it can be adjusted with dimmers, as can the common spaces on the sixth floor.
- House acoustics are nothing short of astonishing. Even if there is a large group eating in the space, the cork material of the tables and the echo-plates prevent loud bangs. Even a hearing-impaired person can have a conversation.
- Meeting rooms are equipped with a fixed induction loop.

The inclusive and customer-oriented way of working of **Risto Hoikkanen**'s, Executive Director, caught on with all partners. VTS, ARA, the builder



Lemminkäinen Talo Oy and many others have learned a lot about deaf blind issues during the project.

Designed for special groups

Accommodation facilities for rehabilitation and the Finnish Deafblind Assocation events are equally accessible. Accessibility solutions for the main building, the new central office, the workspace building and the passageways are designed for people with reduced mobility, further to those who are visually and hearing impaired.

In the sensory garden, residents, course participants, guests and relatives can get to know plants whose names can also be read in Braille. The kitchen garden is open to everyone, and the garden enables service residents' varied Green Care activities.

The staff's readiness to communicate in sign language and the fact that both service residents and renters live on site contribute to the accessibility of their own part. Together, they create a unique community in Finland.

Rewarded building

Invalidiliitto and Rakennustietosäätiö [*Association of Disabled Persons and the Construction Information Foundation*] grant the award to an activity or an entity that has significantly promoted the implementation of barrier-removal and/or accessibility nationwide. The awardee can be a person, an environment, a route system, a building complex, a building, an operating model, a system, a service, a training program, a recreational activity or a plan related to these that has current and general significance. ■





International connections

Text: Riku Virtanen
Pictures: Riku Virtanen's and Timo Lehtonen's image library.

Review of the 2017-2026 office of the European Deafblind Union (EDbU).

The organisation operates on a small scale, and all work is done by the board members as volunteers. In the five-year period, EdbU's most significant event was the seminar at the European Parliament in the spring of 2018. At that time, there were five deafblind people from Finland. Due to the Corona virus, events were held remotely in 2020-2021. Since then, EDbU has organised annual events in various locations across Europe. Moreover, EDbU has arranged forums for young people, women and older people.

One of EDbU's key activities consists in raising awareness of deafblindness. This includes **Helen Keller**'s birthday party in June 27th and the Deafblind Day celebration on October 22.

The small number of national deafblind organisations has proven a major challenge for EDbU. EDbU has endeavoured to raise funding. Funding is conditional upon the participation of at least a member organisation in 14 EU countries.

The next event of the World Federation of the Deafblind (WFDB) is to hold a WFDB general meeting in Davos, Switzerland in July 2027. Prior to that,





Riku Virtanen as a member of the WFBD board in at the UN General Assembly in 2025.

a joint world conference of the WFDB and professionals working in the field of deafblindness will be held at the same venue.

The WFDB published a second global report on deafblindness in late 2022. Reports aim to provide information to potential donors. With this report, It is easier to show potential donors the challenges faced by the deafblind that can be eliminated through international cooperation. One of the challenges is the World Health Organisation's (WHO) list of disability types. The list includes deafness and blindness but there's no mention of deafblindness. Many countries only provide services and resources to groups listed by the WHO. The WFDB is trying to get deaf blindness recognised as its own type of disability.

The most recent significant recognition came in the summer of 2025, when the United Nations officially designated June 27 as International Deafblindness Day.

Aarne Pirkola, the representative from Finland, was elected to the EDbU board at the General Assembly.





Participants at the General Assembly of the European Deafblind Union (EDbU). Chairperson Lehtonen is attending from Finland.

Peer support - invaluable!

Text: Milla Lindh
Pictures: The Finnish Deafblind Association

Being a diverse society means equal treatment for its various actors. At times, people struggle to cope with ordinary everyday life, which may prevent them from having hobbies, engaging politically or taking part in the parents' association.

Everyone is endowed with a functional ability that changes according to circumstances, time of day, age or environment. Even a Tampere housewife lost in the middle of a Hindi-speaking community becomes less talkative when there is no common language. After a meeting that runs into the evening, your mind is not as sharp as when coming to work in the morning and, as you turn 80, you may not be as interested in new sports hobbies as you were in your twenties.

And yet, one appreciates having someone to share the same experience with. A friend's reaction helps one's own attitude, makes it easier to find humour in the situation, and above all, creates a bond.

Everyday stressful situations are usually handled well, and they are not perceived as issues leading to request for peer support. It's as if peer support is only needed when something unpleasant happens and in situations that don't "get better". However, equality is an important part of every day arising from shared experiences. And every person has a need and a right to the positive effects of peer support.

The individual's ability to function can change rapidly and permanently. An accident can hinder your walking ability, going blind can take away the ability to read a magazine or glance at a mountain pass, and deafness can put an end to choir practice. Adapting to these – rarely fatal – situations may prove a major challenge for some people. Every individual will deal with change, face it and enter the scope of peer support and activities at his/her own pace, and in his/her own way.

A person who has experienced the same situation and survived it can be a great advisor. Whether the change in functional capacity is fast or slow, there is no need to start from scratch for everyone: someone has already invented a method, technique, tool, form or other solution for almost all aspects of everyday life. In peer activities, one experiences these solutions in practice.

Peer activities are an integral part of the work of the visual and hearing impaired's own association, The Finnish Deafblind Assocation. But one can hardly talk about peer activities for the visual and hearing impaired without an organisation behind it: there are an estimated 1,200 visual and hearing impaired people in Finland. This small multilingual minority studies, works, is on childcare leave and is engaged in various hobbies in Finland. Meeting another peer is almost impossible without events arranged by the organisation due to the rarity of dual sensory impairment.

Most visual and hearing-impaired people have declining hearing and vision. Some are born deaf, others hearing, and eyesight varies a lot. A small proportion are born completely deafblind. The deterioration of both senses, which directly affects mobility, access to information, and communication, also increases as the population ages. Our activities are also open to spouses, children, close relatives and close friends of the visual and hearing impaired, because living together also requires sharing experiences.

There are dozens of technical aids for both hearing and vision. In particular, there are several applications and programs for computers and mobile









phones, without which their use would be impossible. As services move online, it is essential that the platforms and systems used are accessible with all the relevant aids. Updates must also not interfere with content access. On the other hand, the development of assistive devices also requires continuous usage training and, ultimately, a person's ability to learn.

Resources for learning new content vary individually. When simply getting through daily life takes all your energy, self-development can lose its appeal. It is overwhelming when, for example, an application that one learned to use with an assistive device changes after an update, and the assistive device stops working with it. You can't bear to learn it all over again. The same happens when, for example, your vision deteriorates to the point that you no longer manage to do things independently that you could easily handle before. Going out gradually becom es less exciting when you can't get information about the times of events by looking at ads or you fail to see bus schedules or numbers.

In peer situations, the emphasis is on finding different solutions through examples. It all starts with an encounter where it suddenly dawns on you that the person opposite really knows what you're going through. He/she may have experienced the same and found a way out of the dead end and got back on track. His/her story may be different, but he/she genuinely wants to help and is there for you.

Permanent peer support calls for

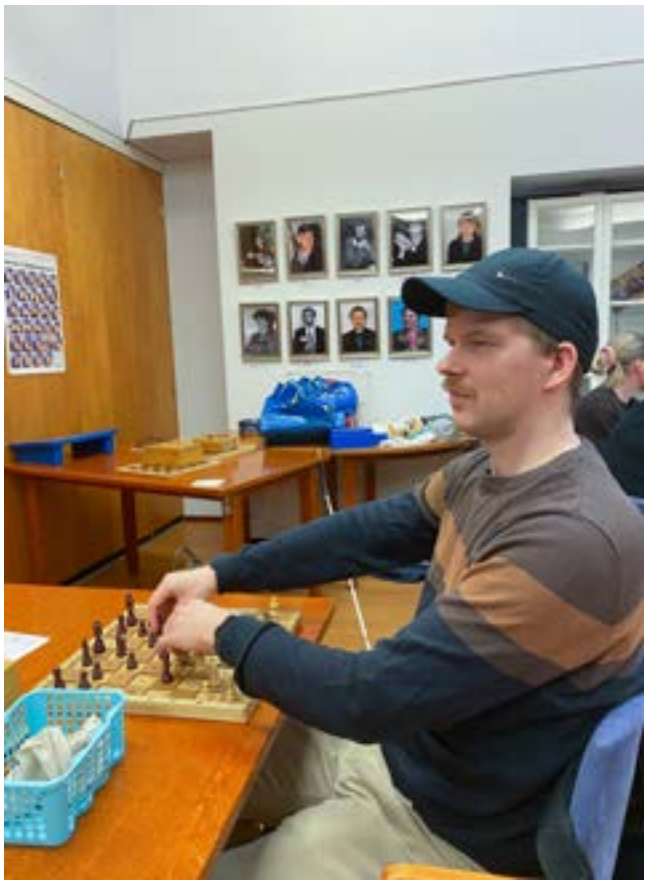


structures to provide the necessary resources. Organisations have the ability and channel to help people in need of support meet peers for the first time. Peer-to-peer activities are coordinated, often structured around an event or regular activity, you can attend if and when you feel ready for it.

Peer workers are offered training in organisations. Confronting different solution models, moods and life situations requires sensitivity and skills that can be exercised. Peer support is best available without an appointment. Come as you are and bring yourself to this community.

A chess club meets at the Resource Center for the Deafblind in Tampere. The club is run by a volunteer peer worker. He uses sign language, and always asks interpreters to accompany him: interpreters translate sign language into spoken Finnish and vice versa. This removes communication barriers. The club uses chess boards for the blind, which are completely tactile: white pieces have a ball or other marking on their heads and the pieces have a peg at the bottom. The peg goes into the hole in the centre of each square and holds the piece in place while the blind person feels the effects of the opponent's move on his/her own strategy. White squares are higher than black ones and the numbers and letters of the squares can be felt in Braille and as signs for the sighted.

A shared experience of time and memory brings players together. Even if some player had some eye sight, he/





she might not be able to use it during a game. The players' level varies from long-time enthusiasts to beginners, and there is enough motivation not only to play, but also to teach, advise and discuss game strategies. Deafblind interpreters' skills also include description which can be done verbally, with signs or by drawing on the back. Everything is familiar to participants, and there is no need to explain the special features of the hearing impairment to anyone.

Individual assistive and communication solutions alone are not enough to maintain functional ability. They set requirements for the facilities used to make participation accessible to all. The Resource Center for the Deafblind has several rooms or spaces with enough space for interpreters or assistants, and adjustable lighting, fixed induction loop, movable chairs and tables, and the spaces are made anechoic. Some members of the group occasionally take part in chess nights for the visually impaired. This puts the hearing impaired in a though spot, because the visually-impaired talk over each other and comment out loud quickly – and spaces are often echoic, making it difficult for the hearing-impaired to understand. On the other hand, interpreters cannot be asked to constantly decide whose speech to interpret, when in-game comments are shouted simultaneously and you can hardly tell who said what.

Visual and hearing-impaired people study all the time in elementary school, second level and higher education. Personal assistance and support



services are commonplace and, at best, you need not think about them at all. Aids work so well and uncomplicatedly that even the white cane just grows into an extension of the hand and the battery of the cochlear implant lasts the entire time you are awake, that you don't remember how your own hearing depends on a technical device. The role and duties of an interpreter or assistant do not give rise to much opinion in the environment. This is the case with peer-to-peer activities, and the goal is for the different actors to receive equal treatment in society as a whole. ■









Camps, excursions, and events are organized across Finland.

Our sensory garden

Text: Veera Friis
Pictures: The Finnish Deafblind Association

A sensory garden was built in Hervanta, Tampere (Finland) in 2012-2018. The garden aims to provide residents of The Resource Center for the Deafblind with an opportunity to get acquainted with different plants in a holistic way. The sensory garden is also designed to create comfortable and functional outdoor spaces for residents to enjoy and spend time in. The sensory garden is also a "living room" for residents and visitors in the area, where you can spend time and meet other residents and employees. Residents and their opinions were involved in the design and operation of the sensory garden from the outset; residents were asked, for example, what plants they wanted in the garden. The sensory garden is widely used for various events, such as the weekly barbecue evenings during the summer season, the residents' own parties and receiving guests, weather permitting.

The sensory garden is built to be barrier-free and accessible. Plants are held in plant boxes – no need to bend down to examine them – set at a suitable height for both wheelchair users and those who walk; you can also walk around plant boxes and look at plants from many different angles. Walkways are wide and paved with tiles so that you can use them in a wheelchair, on







your own with a white cane, and with an interpreter. Lawn areas and tiled areas are separated by boundaries.

Plants in the sensory garden have been selected according to several different criteria. They been chosen to engage as many senses as possible. The smell and feel of the plants to the touch, the place of growth and the growth medium have been considered. All plants are absolutely non-toxic and most of them are also edible, so you can still get a sense of taste. The garden grows many traditional Finnish plants, along with common Finnish garden plants that are familiar to many. The list includes herbs such as lavender and marjoram, vegetables such as lettuce and tomato and berry bushes such as red wine berry and bush blueberry. ■









ICT services of The Finnish Deafblind Association

Text: Marko Vainiomaa
Pictures: The Finnish Deafblind Association

The Finnsh Deafblind Association´s ICT services offer various trainings, support services and events to deafblind and hearing-impaired customers. Services are free for users and funding is provided by the Social and Health Organizations Assistance Centre (STEA). Three of the ICT services employees are in Tampere and two in Jyväskylä, Finland. However, the service is offered nationwide.

Educational activities are mainly organised in a group format in the ICT education class at The Resource Center for the Deafblind in Tampere. Moreover, individual training can be arranged at the customer's home, workplace or other suitable location. Training is also arranged using various remote methods, both in group and individual format.

Besides educational activities, ICT support is a very important service for the deafblind. The service aims to ensure error-free and reliable operation of customers' computers, telephones and other IT devices with the help of aids. In 2020, the service abandoned the regional division model, where Finland was divided into areas of responsibility, and switched to a nationally centralised digital helpdesk service. The goal was to make operations more efficient, reduce the response time of the service and secure the services in the event of a decrease in human resources.

Helpdesk

The Helpdesk acts as a support centre where service or support requests can be sent by email or by calling on the phone. ICT service employees can be connected to the service number, regardless of their physical location, and several employees can work in the service at the same time. Support



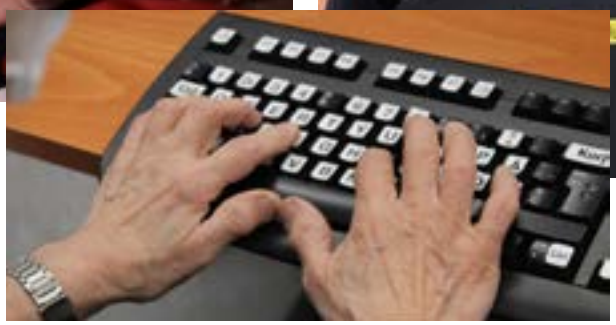
requests entered in the Helpdesk system are logged in the system and the work can be assigned to a free employee working in the Helpdesk. Support requests turn into tickets which can be used to monitor and manage the work progress and completion. This ensures that customers can monitor how and who is solving his problem. Moreover, customers can send additional information for this particular case with a simple email or message via phone.

The Helpdesk is connected to remote management services, which are used by almost all deafblind ICT customers. With the remote management service, a Helpdesk employee can very quickly solve the customer's problems, regardless of the employee's or the customer's physical location. If the problem cannot be solved through the Helpdesk service, the work is transferred to another employee who, if necessary, pays the customer a visit. Since approximately 70% of the service requests received have been resolved directly at the Helpdesk, it has been possible to direct resources more quickly and efficiently to support visits to customer. This operational change has significantly reduced costs compared to the former operating model. The service, introduced just before the corona pandemic, both accelerated the transition of customers to Helpdesk and enabled support services to operate during corona lockdowns.

The global change in the use of online services has also affected our operations. More and more events are being held online. However, the last years have shown that organising physical events remains relevant. ■







Social-haptic communication (SHC)

Text: Riitta Lahtinen
Pictures: Riitta Lahtinen's image library

When vision and hearing modalities change, we use other modalities such as touch/tactile, kinaesthetic, smell and taste. The combination of these modalities is known as haptic. Haptic is the framework for SHC research. SHC identifies how haptices are shared and information is conveyed through touch in different parts of the body. The research and development of SHC started in early 1990.

The SHC approach includes shared experiences of language and environmental information based on touch, movements and orientation. Haptices are touch-messages that allow two or more people to interact together to improve the quality of information during a conversation and activity, whereas in haptic communication information is received individually through various technical devices. Haptiering is used as a part of the multi-language approach. We can use spoken or sign language and haptices together at the same time. They quickly give the visual information of non-verbal communication and environmental description in real-time. This is possible because of the linguistic elements of SHC, called haptemes, which allow the new haptices to be produced in a new situation. The social-haptic language compares phonemes and the grammar of signing. Haptemes are for example, pressure, duration, direction and speed.

Haptices are produced onto various neutral parts of person's body by hands or other body areas such as head, leg or shoulder. Haptices function in the dark, in noisy situations and without any visual or auditory aids. Haptices are formed in different ways; some are a natural description of an activity, while others are based on writing/letters, signs or visual symbols. When signs are changed into haptices, their grammatical structures change. Haptices can be grouped into several sub-groups used in a particular situation or by a specific group of professionals such as musical-haptices, haptices in hospital, how to describe the universe onto the body, or IT and guide dog training.

Haptices can share social (emotions, behaviour), functional (movements) and environmental (directions, mapping the environment) information. Social quick messages include 20 haptices for everyday living which I teach first for deafblind people and family members. They are for example, initiating contact, leaving the personal area and confirmations. Picture 1

illustrates YES-haptice onto the arm. Visual arts, music and games by haptices will build up a visual image and action. Paintings, hobbies such as football or ten-pin bowling can be haptiering onto the back independently or with spoken or sign languages.



Picture 1: YES-haptice onto the arm

By haptiering we can describe the environment, giving an overview of the space and spatial structures. This is done by locating the space and object in relation to the body, how many objects there are and in which direction. Haptiering proceeds logically so the receiver can build up a mental image of the space.

Picture 2 illustrates how the Solar system can be representated using hands and fingers.

Users of SHC have expanded to different user groups such as visually impaired children and adults, staff working with the elderly and dementia, and



Picture 2: The Solar system onto the body

different communication disorders. SHC has rapidly developed through different deafblind communities and has been recognised part of educational and rehabilitation programmes; interpreting and deafblindness studies in many countries in the UK, Australia, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Nordic countries, Canada, and Brazil.

My PhD on SHC entitled "*Haptices and Haptemes - A case study of Developmental Process in Social-Haptic Communication of Acquired Deafblind People*" was published in 2008 which gave me a national innovative award from the Finnish National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health. Now SHC is supervised in various countries, who are collating their own national haptices dictionaries, PhD and master students and researchers at different universities. In 2019-21 we were as members of advisory group in an EU-project SUITCEYES. Their aim was producing Smart Clothes for deafblind people which transmit haptices onto

the body via vibrating sensors. Picture 3 illustrates testing the Smart Clothes vest, which was giving the emergency-haptice X information. In future smart clothes can portray haptices at a distance onto different locations on the body.



Picture 3: Testing a smart vest.

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For further information about haptices, contact:
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Individualized rehabilitation services for the hearing and visually impaired

Text: Hanna Tenhunen
Pictures: The Finnish Deafblind Association

At The Finnish Deafblind Association, we help people with combined vision and hearing loss build the skills and confidence they need to live as independently and fully as possible.

Our personalized, one-to-one rehabilitation services are designed for children, young people, adults, and their families. Delivered by a highly experienced multidisciplinary team, our programs focus on practical solutions that make everyday life easier, safer, and more accessible.

Specialized Expertise You Can Trust

Our rehabilitation professionals have extensive expertise in supporting people with dual sensory loss and complex communication needs. Services are funded by Kela and provided at the Resource Center for the Deafblind in Tampere, Finland.

Our accessible rehabilitation facilities have been carefully designed to meet the needs of people with vision and hearing impairments. Features include:

- High-contrast colors and clear visual guidance
- Glare-free, well-balanced lighting
- Excellent acoustics with minimal echo
- Accessible signage that supports independent orientation and mobility
- Safe, comfortable accommodation for participants of all ages

Individual Rehabilitation for Adults

Adults with combined vision and hearing loss can apply for Kela-funded individual rehabilitation when support is needed for work, studies, or everyday life.

Each rehabilitation program begins with personal goals based on the participant's own needs and aspirations. Together with our multidisciplinary team, participants develop practical skills and strategies that strengthen independence, improve daily functioning, and support long-term well-being.

There is no age limit for discretionary individual rehabilitation. Adults under the age of 65 with combined vision and hearing loss may be eligible for Kela-funded demanding multidisciplinary medical rehabilitation.

Rehabilitation for Children and Young People

Our rehabilitation services for children and young people are tailored to each participant's age, developmental stage, communication methods, and individual abilities.

Parents and siblings are encouraged to participate according to the child's rehabilitation plan and Kela's decision. Family involvement plays a vital role in helping new skills become part of everyday life at home, school, and in the community.

Each rehabilitation program is created together with the child, their family, and our multidisciplinary team. The program focuses on meaningful participation, communication, interaction, and making the best possible use of the individual's remaining vision and hearing, as well as other senses.

Supporting People with Multiple Disabilities

Many children and adults with multiple disabilities also experience vision and hearing loss, which may not always be recognized. Our specialized rehabilitation helps identify and address dual sensory loss alongside other conditions such as cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, or Down syndrome.

By strengthening communication, interaction, sensory awareness, and everyday living skills, rehabilitation supports greater participation, independence, and quality of life.

Our Goal

Our mission is simple: to help every participant find practical solutions that improve daily life, increase independence, and enable full participation in society.

Through personalized rehabilitation, expert guidance, and family-centered support, we empower people with deafblindness and dual sensory loss to achieve their individual goals and live life with greater confidence.



Regional services

Text: Taru Kaaja
Pictures: The Finnish Deafblind Association

The service experts of regional services are available to people with visually and hearing impairments of all ages, their families and close friends, as well as the authorities. Contact does not require association membership.

People contact us if they need support and guidance in matters related to visual and hearing impairment or in directing services. We do cooperation with Kela, rehabilitation counselors or social and healthcare authorities. The services provided by society are not always suitable for the deafblind or visual and hearing impaired. That is why we have to make individual solutions and decisions. Service experts support the customer in this process.

We are generally contacted by following matters:

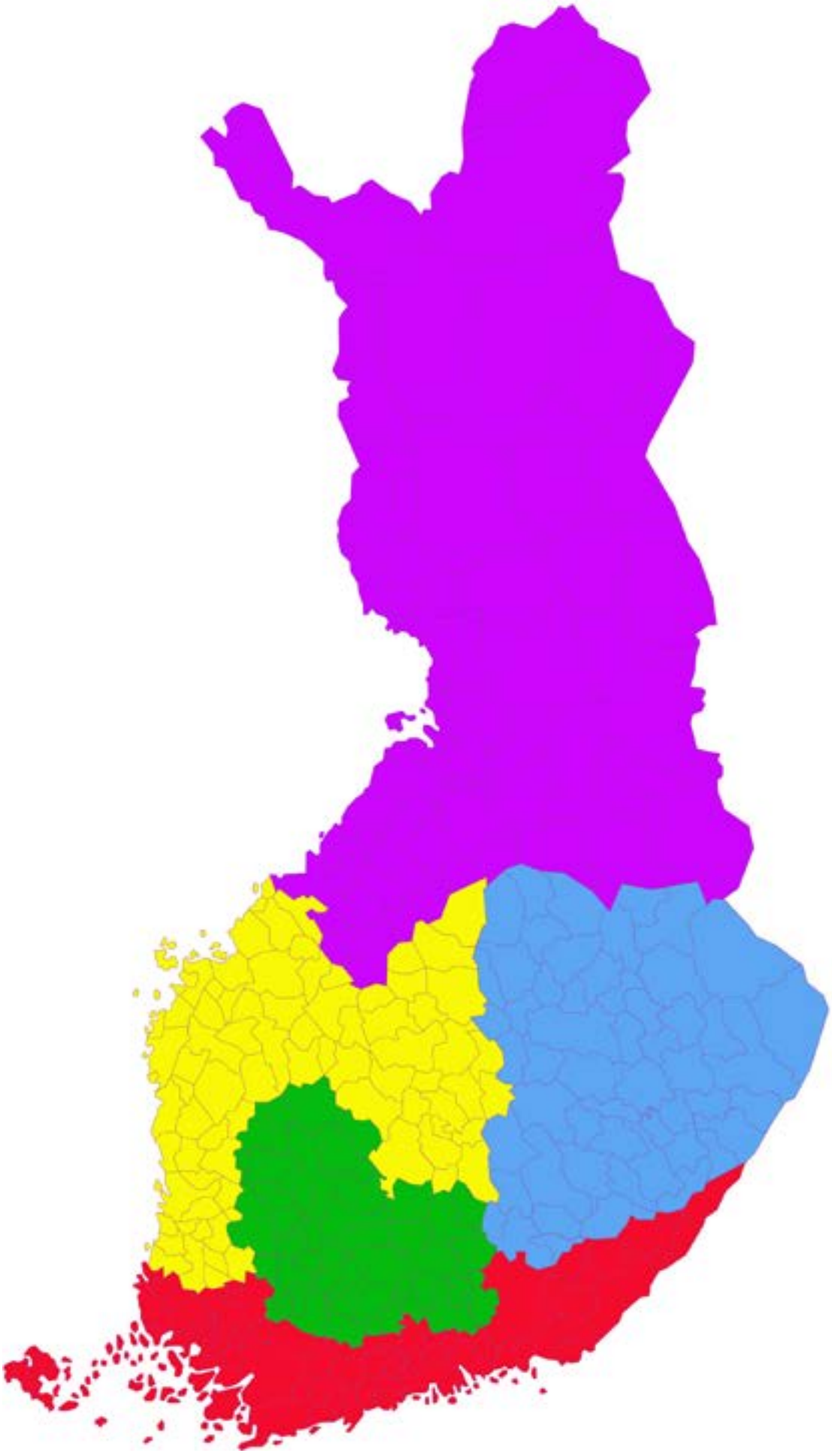
- disability services
- housing services
- interpretation services
- everyday aids
- applying for financial support
- appeal against authority decisions
- counseling and training
- day care and schools
- peer support and the organization's own services

The service experts cooperates with other services of the organization and organizes regional events.

There are a total of five service experts and they have been assigned their own areas of responsibility. ■







Welcome To the Resource Center for the Deafblind in Tampere!

