



Expanding Communication Access to the Deaf Community

How can you ensure communication access to a diverse **d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing (d/Deaf/HoH)** community? Start by becoming familiar with the various communication modes, technology options and accommodations used by this population, in addition to the different ways people identify themselves. Seek out partnerships with both State and community programs in your area that primarily serve the d/Deaf/HoH community. The more opportunities you have to interact with this diverse community, the more you will learn!

Diversity in Identity, Communication & Education

There are **48,000,000** people in the US who are deaf or Hard of Hearing, while **3,000,000** people identify as big 'D' culturally Deaf and use American Sign Language (ASL). There are wide variations in cause and degree of hearing loss, age of onset, educational background, communication methods, and how individuals feel about their hearing loss. More than **90% of deaf children** are born to hearing parents and are not exposed to sign language until school age, missing a vital window of time for language acquisition. Alternatively, more than **90% of deaf parents** have hearing children, which can lead to communication challenges in families.

While special education promotes integration of children with and without disabilities as a least restrictive environment (LRE), Deaf cultural perspective holds that a language rich environment is best achieved through ASL. Therefore, a **LRE for deaf children involves access to information through sign language and interaction with peers**. Rather than an education offered solely through English *or* ASL, many in the Deaf community believe that schools can capitalize on a bilingual approach through **both ASL and written English**.

“It is Good and Right to Be Deaf”

Although some people may view deafness as a disability, the culturally Deaf community views itself as a **language minority** who can do everything except hear. Culturally Deaf people identify as **big “D” Deaf**. At the heart of Deaf culture is ASL, which has its own vocabulary, grammar and rules for syntax, as well as pragmatics that involve signs, facial expressions and body postures. ASL is the fourth most used language in the US. **Deaf culture** maintains a history of overcoming oppression, longstanding ASL storytelling transmitted across generations, and many other shared norms such as relying on touch and lights on for vision.

Common Misperceptions about the Deaf/HoH Community

- **Communication modes greatly vary** – d/Deaf/HoH may use any combination of sign language, lip-reading, and/or residual hearing from hearing aids or cochlear implants
- **ASL is *not* English** on the hands and is ***not* universal**; it varies internationally/regionally
- Speechreading is not simple or highly accurate; only 30% of speech is visible on the lips
- Very few d/Deaf/HoH people use TTYs; **Video phones, Skype, Face-time are popular** ways to conduct daily tasks like making appointments, banking, or ordering take-out
- **Video Relay Service** is more commonly used by the d/Deaf/HoH community with hearing people, in real-time, via sign language interpreters
- Cochlear Implants give **access to sound** and through training, can help identify speech



Sign Language Interpreters

Qualified vs. Certified

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires a *qualified* interpreter. Certification is not a federal requirement, but **hiring a certified interpreter** is the best way to meet requirements of the law. You cannot require an individual who is Deaf/HoH to bring another individual to interpret because he/she is entitled to someone “***who is able to interpret effectively, accurately and impartially.***” Family members are *not* considered impartial, effective or appropriate interpreters; neither is “*someone who knows a little sign*”.

When to Hire a Sign Language Interpreter

Writing notes may be appropriate for **brief, simple face-to-face exchanges**, such as for making an appointment, introducing resources, picking up information, or brief exchanges.

Interpreters are likely needed for **more complex situations**, such as meetings, interviews, orientations, training, workshops, or situations in which misunderstandings arise.

Be sure to **relay the type of information** that will be translated to ensure the interpreter is qualified and experienced. For example, skilled interpreters may be needed to translate in areas of taxes, medical, legal and financial information.

How to Hire a Sign Language Interpreter

There are many interpreter referral agencies that offer services. Start with your State agency:

Statewide Services for Individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

<http://www3.gallaudet.edu/clerc-center/info-to-go/national-resources-and-directories/statewide-services.html>

Proving Undue Burden is Difficult

Under the ADA, effective communication is whatever is written or spoken must be as clear and understandable to all individuals, including Deaf/HoH. It is required except when it would fundamentally alter the nature of the service or program in question or would result in an undue financial and administrative burden. **Undue burden is case-by-case** and measured by the overall financial impact on the entire entity. The National Association for the Deaf reports that they are not aware of any court decisions that have been upheld proving undue burden in providing interpreter services. <https://www.nad.org/resources/civil-rights-laws/americans-with-disabilities-act/public-accommodations/>

It is recommended that agencies and programs that serve the general public set aside funding for reasonable accommodations, which could be used to hire sign language interpreters.

Partnering with the Deaf Community

Effective partnering with state/local agencies that primarily serve the Deaf/HoH community and also offer interpreter services is often the **most effective way to learn about and ensure equal communication access**. These programs can offer support in determining effective communication modes, technology needs and support services or resources available. To maintain effective communication, start by asking each person what works best!

- **Statewide Services for Individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing**
<http://www3.gallaudet.edu/clerc-center/info-to-go/national-resources-and-directories/statewide-services.html>
- **Effective Communication Resources:** www.ada.gov/effective-comm.htm

Tips for Creating a Deaf Inclusive Organization or Program

- **Use ‘Deaf/HoH’** in outreach, marketing, social media; many do not identify with ‘disability’
- If events/programs offer sign language interpreters, **use this symbol in all promotions**
- Ensure accommodations statements **list how/who to contact to request interpreter**
- English is a second language for some d/Deaf, so use **pictures, symbols and signage**
- **Invite Deaf/HoH people to join State/local committees** to ensure communication access is addressed in all initiatives and activities in the community
- **Promote Video Relay Services** within your community and among partners (*It’s easy!*)
- **Collaborate with Deaf/HoH partners** in your community, including:
 - Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf (RCDs), Schools for the Deaf/College Programs for the Deaf, Centers for Independent Living Deaf Programs, Mental Health and Developmental Disability Programs for Deaf