

Considerations for Responding to Survivors Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Adapted from the Georgia SART Guide by Ana Price, past Executive Director of Deaf Unity

The victim specific or cultural consideration section is designed to help SART members understand victims from diverse cultures to ensure all victims are served with respect regardless of their background. This section is intended to be a tool to help professionals; however, it is the responsibility of each SART member to integrate culturally relevant and responsive care into their services for victims. It is hoped that SARTs will utilize these considerations to increase their understanding of diversity and learn ways to serve victims with respect to their cultural background and identities. ¹

By implementing these principles in your work, you will be able to create a "deaf space," meaning you and the deaf/hard of hearing person(s) will make a positive experience that will be deaf-friendly.

Let's start with the Deaf culture's history to understand better the Deaf/Hard of Hearing individual.

In the Deaf community, there are different identities of deafness: Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deafblind. The term "hearing impaired" has become an extremely negative term. Hearing-impaired is the medical terminology for those who are in the Deaf community. So, we identify ourselves between the following:

- **Deaf** – those who are profoundly deaf with or without assisted listening devices or who identify themselves as culturally deaf.
- **Hard of Hearing** – those who have some residual hearing without assisted listening devices.
- **Deafblind** – those who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing with all degrees of visual loss.
- **Late Deafened** - those who become Deaf later in life, gradually or suddenly. They may also maintain their hearing lifestyle, despite hearing loss. They may need different accommodations.
- **Cochlear Implant (CI)**- implants are small electronic devices surgically implanted in the inner ear that help provide a sense of sound to people with more severe-to-profound hearing loss. Cochlear implants can be recommended for one or both ears.

When we speak about Deaf culture, we are referring to the community in the United States. We primarily use American Sign Language (ASL). It is necessary to clarify the community is tailored to the United States because every country may have their own sign language, which may be different in their styles. Within ASL, there are regional dialects and slangs, just like the English language. Not all Deaf individuals use ASL, which is the only officially recognized language, and may use different communication methods such as:

¹ Georgia Sexual Assault Response Team Guide. 2021. [2021sartguidev2-final.pdf \(svrga.org\)](#)

- Signed Exact English (SEE)
 - Pidgin Signed English (PSE)
 - Cued Speech
 - Oral Interpreting (interpreter silently mouths words that are easier to lip-read).
 - Deafblind people use ASL; however, in a tactile method.
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How Do Deaf/Hard of Hearing Individuals Acquire Language:

Due to several historical oppressive teaching methods, Deaf children were taught in varying methods, which impacted their learning and language development. ASL, identified as its own language with its own grammar and syntax, still faces resistance in schools, causing language delays.

Reading and writing in English can be difficult for a Deaf individual. The English language is a **second** language for many Deaf people. Written communication, forms, paperwork, and other reading materials should be accessible for Deaf victims/survivors.

The best practice is to make sure **any** documents are developed for **all** ages to read. This is an especially important thing to consider because understanding English as a second language will also impact their understanding or interpretations of legal documentation and could cause unintended and unnecessary actions being taken.

Deaf Lens: Different Types of Barriers Deaf/Hard of Hearing Individuals Face:

Deaf/Hard of Hearing Individuals faces different types of barriers in receiving support from service providers, law enforcement, etc.

Family, educational, economic, socialization, and religious upbringing experiences are factors why Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals may have a hard time being assertive, understanding, and distinguishing appropriate/healthy vs. inappropriate/unhealthy behaviors and relationships, etc. They also may be undeveloped or underdeveloped as they enter adulthood and throughout adulthood.

Some Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals do not trust interpreters or well-meaning signing and hearing people because the deaf community is so small.

Here are some examples of barriers Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals face:

Public Barriers:

- Few job opportunities and lack of access to educational opportunities
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals may lack economic resources and the independence to seek help.
- Mass media and public service announcements are often not accessible.

Attitudinal Barriers:

- Service providers may be uncomfortable working with Deaf/Hard of Hearing people
- Lack of understanding and/or knowledge of the Deaf/Hard of Hearing community.
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals may fear severing ties with their only support system in a hearing dominated world.
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals find themselves at the lower tier of service priority because of their apparent physical abilities or because of communication barriers, or both.
- Daily struggles with hearing systems prevent Deaf/Hard of Hearing people from seeking help or reporting abuse.
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing people may fear rejection, ostracism, or retribution by the Deaf Community if they disclose abuse or assault by one of its members.
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals may fear that their plans or actions may become known in the community.

Service Barriers:

- Transportation.
- Access to effective communication.
- Written communication is often not the best option and method because of English and brevity/omission of information that could help assess the situation; writing is a tedious task.
- Limited access to assistive technology.
- Informational resources (e.g., visually represented, signed, and captioned videos, etc.) and educational opportunities about services are lacking.
- Lack of awareness and support in the Deaf Community makes it difficult for Deaf survivors to seek help.
- Information that occurs incidentally and naturally is not accessible.
- Programs and services are not always advertised or made available to the Deaf "public."

- If the initial point of contact for help (e.g., crisis line advocate or police officer) is not trauma-informed, the Deaf survivor may stop right there and not go any further for help.
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing people do not go to services knowing or believing that services are not provided with interpreters, culturally competent staff, communication technology, or peers who understand and relate to them.

How to Communicate with A Deaf/Hard of Hearing Individual

There are several behavioral methods Deaf people employ that may appear very unusual to hearing people:

- One of the most significant behavioral methods is being very expressive facial-wise when signing. Facial expression is our way of emphasizing tone, emotion, severity, or mood towards the topic.
- Our expressive faces do not always showcase what we are feeling now. Sometimes, they showcase what we felt when the story took place, show apathy towards the topic being discussed, or show humor in a situation that could be perceived as not humorous.
- Tapping one's shoulder, banging on a surface, or flashing lights to get another person's attention is very typical for those who are not in a Deaf person's line of sight.

Within the Deaf community, there is **no one-size-fits-all in communication**. There are multiple options for communication. This list is not all-inclusive.

- **American Sign Language (ASL)** – ASL is one of the most common methods of communication. As mentioned in the previous section, it is the only recognized language in the Deaf community. ASL is a visual language that has its own vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and idioms. ASL consists of handshapes, position, movement, and orientation of the hands and the body to convey the message. In addition to the physical aspects of ASL, it also uses the space, direction, speed of movement, and facial expressions to carry the message.
- **Sign Language** – there are visual forms of communication called sign language that are not official languages.
 - Signed Exact English (SEE) uses manual communication that represents English vocabulary and grammar with misuse of certain signs that do not match the actual meaning of words.
 - Pidgin Signed English (PSE) is a combination of ASL and Signed English.
 - Cued Speech uses mouth movements combined with handshapes to represent sounds that produce words.
 - Home signs are used within homes, where families or certain small groups may have created signs on their own to communicate with each other.

- **Writing or Texting In-Person** – this involves the use of paper and pen or the survivor’s phone, tablet, or computer to communicate in a written form. This method is useful for temporary or short conversation solutions. Long term conversations may cause confusion/inability to read and understand appropriately and may be impacted if the survivor has Limited English Proficiency (LEP).
- **Lip Reading (Or Speech Reading)** – this is understanding the spoken word by watching the speaker's lips, face, and gestures. It is a complicated communication method, as only 30 percent of speech is understood from the lips. Understanding the topic before a conversation begins may help the lip-reader understand what is being said but is not always practical.
- **Buddy System** – the use of another person (friend, family, significant other, co-worker, etc.) to help fill in gaps missed while lip-reading or in large group conversations. They may help fill in gaps such as words missed, the exact repetition of sentences missed, or an overall summary that will help the individual understand what was missed.
- **Oral** – specific individuals may have grown up learning the oral method, which means they speak verbally, and lip read to converse. Sometimes their speech may be unintelligible, but they were told that they can be understood. It is also possible they will not know how sign language, due to oppressive oral teaching methods.

How to Request and Obtain Quality Interpreters

When requesting and obtaining an interpreter, there are many things to consider, including the types of interpreters, certifications, and licensing.

Do not use children or any family members to interpret.

First and foremost, ask the Deaf survivor what kind of Interpreter they prefer. Sometimes they have a specific signing/communication method or a particular interpreter they choose to work with. This is important; some interpreters could have connections to the perpetrator or have personality differences that will hinder their ability to communicate effectively.

Providing exactly what they ask for will allow ease of communication with all parties involved.

Different Types of Interpreters

- **ASL (or Sign Language) Interpreter** – a hearing individual trained to facilitate communication between the Deaf person and a hearing person by taking all verbal communication from the hearing person and interpreting it into sign language for the Deaf person.
- **Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI)** – a Deaf individual who is a native user of ASL, trained to facilitate communication between the Deaf person and the hearing ASL interpreter. The CDI will assess the preferred communication needs and then communicate in the same way to the Deaf person and interpret the Deaf person's response into ASL for the hearing interpreter.
- **Oral Interpreter** – a hearing interpreter that is trained to deliver the message orally (via lip reading). Words are modified to vocabulary that is easier to understand while reading lips.

It is hugely beneficial for all those involved in the meeting to have a CDI when the ASL interpreter is having difficulty working with or understanding specific individuals. This adds more time to meetings and appointments, but communication and needed information will be communicated clearly. It also allows the Deaf person to feel confident that what they are saying is being accurately interpreted.

Reasons Why a CDI is Beneficial

- Concepts and information are provided in a far more visual and conceptual way that allows the Deaf person to understand more confidently.
- A CDI allows the Deaf person to speak up at times when they usually would not because they understand more of what is being discussed.
- Deaf survivors may be emotional, traumatized, and mentally and physically exhausted, which may create more difficulties communicating. A CDI will understand more of what they are trying to convey and support the ASL interpreter to interpret accurately.

How to Obtain an ASL and/or CDI Interpreter

When you are ready to arrange for an Interpreter, there are some things you should know or prepare before contacting the interpreting agency. By having this information ready, you will ensure that the Interpreter is equipped to provide the best interpreting experience at the appointment time. Things you should keep in mind include:

- Date, time, duration, nature of the appointment, and location of the appointment
- Communication mode of the survivor
- Name(s) of preferred interpreter(s), if applicable
- On-site contact person and telephone number

- Name(s) of survivor(s) case number(s), if applicable
- Special considerations such as badges, security passes, parking, printed materials, presentation materials, and logistical needs
- Who and where to invoice - this is an excellent opportunity to find out the rates or additional fees
- Any information that would help ensure the Interpreter is not affiliated with the abuser

How to Work with Interpreters

Working with interpreters can be a unique experience for you and may be confusing. Here are some tips for using a sign language interpreter:

- The Interpreter's role is to interpret everything that is being said, verbally or visually. Everything that is expressed in the appointment content-wise is kept confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone. (Refer to Code of Professional Conduct section)
- When talking to the client, do not look at the Interpreter. Maintain eye contact with the Deaf person. They may not maintain eye contact while you are talking due to watching the Interpreter.
- Talk directly to the Deaf person and talk to them like you would to anyone else. Do not say "tell her" or "ask him."
- Consider Deaf space; make sure the Interpreter is next to you or slightly behind you, with no windows or lighting behind the Interpreter.
- A solid background is best for platform speaking (conferences, presentations, or trainings). Consider lighting brightness, and remove/disable potential distractions (TV's, computer, etc.)
- Talk at a normal speed, do not slow down for the Interpreter unless requested to do so.
- In a group meeting, ask participants to talk one at a time to avoid confusion. Overlapping talk is impossible to interpret.
- It is normal for the Interpreter to lag behind the speaker as their job is to interpret the message in its equivalence, including all information that is heard or seen. This requires time for them to get the goal of the information and then interpret the message. You may notice the Interpreter still signing when you are done talking or still talking when the Deaf person stops signing.

- Interpreting is mentally and physically taxing, requiring full concentration to interpret verbal to visual content and vice versa. It is recommended interpreters take a break after an hour if working alone. If meetings are more than two hours, a team of a minimum of two interpreters will be required.

If You Absolutely Cannot Get an Interpreter

Write simple sentences to the Deaf person, remembering they are in crisis and may need time to think and process information.

- Remember, English is a second language for individuals with hearing loss.
- Use simple words. Instead of asking, “did he/she assault you?” it is better to say, “did he/she hurt you?”
- A small percentage of Deaf/Hard of Hearing people read lips well, but only **30 percent** of what is said is visible on the lips and may be incredibly challenging to understand in stressful situations. Avoid using lip-reading as the communication method, even if the Deaf or Hard of Hearing individual states that it is alright.

In Summary...

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- Embrace Deaf or Hard of Hearing individuals as members of a linguistic and cultural community.
 - Don't assume the person who accompanies the Deaf person is who you should use for communication until an interpreter arrives. That person may be the abuser, or they could alter information in favor of the abuser.
 - Ask the Deaf person if there are any preferred interpreters they want to work with; that usually helps the information flow much better. Alternatively, make sure you respect their *Do Not Request* list of interpreters; there may be reasons why they will not work with a particular person that will be harmful to their healing process.
 - Check with the Deaf person before requesting any services. The abuser may have connections, and the information could get back to the abuser.
 - Between oppression from hearing privilege and language delays, there is a lack of access to information to help them get services.
 - Be mindful of your word choices because a particular word or action can trigger many years of oppression and cause the Deaf person to reach their tipping point and react unexpectedly.
 - With the Deaf community being so close-knit, it is easy to be judged, cast under a constant spotlight, or looked down upon for speaking up about their situations.
 - When at the hospital with a Deaf/Hard of Hearing individual, remember that the hospital interpreter will not interpret for law enforcement. Law enforcement officers will need to provide and pay for a separate Interpreter.

Resources for Professionals

1. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID, www.rid.org)
2. Wisconsin Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (WisRID, www.wisrid.org)

For the most updated interpreting agencies in the state of Wisconsin, visit the Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) website:
<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/odhh/interpreting/interpreter-agencies.htm>

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