



# **DEVELOPING A LANGUAGE ACCESS PLAN**

**To Serve Deaf Survivors**

**May 2024**

**Activating  
→ Change**

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# About Activating Change



People with disabilities and Deaf people are victimized, criminalized, and incarcerated at epidemic levels in the United States. But they have been long excluded from the solutions to these problems. Activating Change is centering people with disabilities and Deaf people and the safety and justice issues they face in social justice movements.

Activating Change raises awareness about the justice issues people with disabilities and Deaf people experience and promotes strategies to address these issues. We bring together people and organizations from across the country working in disability, survivor advocacy, and criminal legal system reform movements.

**We foster alignment, build capacity, and support greater coordination across social justice movements to realize our goals of freedom and healing - not harm and punishment - for people with disabilities and Deaf people.**

Informed by our work with movement leaders and organizations, we also work within systems and with system actors to reduce disparities and adopt strategies that promote dignity, autonomy, accessibility, healing, and fairness for people with disabilities and Deaf people. We collaborate with Disability and Deaf communities across the country and work in close partnership with government and advocacy leaders to implement change.

# Purpose of the Guide

Research on victimization within the Deaf community suggests that Deaf individuals living in the United States have higher rates of domestic and sexual victimization than their hearing counterparts. Despite these higher rates of domestic and sexual violence, Deaf survivors face barriers that prevent them from getting help. When Deaf survivors reach out for services and support and their needs are not met, their experience of trauma is compounded by the very systems and services that are intended to help. Communication and cultural barriers are built into these systems because they were not designed specifically to meet the needs of Deaf victims and survivors.

The purpose of this guide is to provide victim service providers and allied professionals with a process and practical strategies to remove barriers that prevent Deaf victims and survivors from accessing services and create more accessible and culturally responsive services. Integrating language access throughout all aspects of your organizations is essential for ensuring your organization can effectively serve Deaf survivors, victims, family members, and other people impacted by violence.



Language access is a matter of dignity; It's not just about hiring an interpreter. Language access is about placing value on understanding a person's culture and how that person interacts in the world and understands concepts. Providing language access shows respect for the person's language, culture, and experience. Providing language access to victims and survivors, in particular, honors their humanity and worth in the wake of an experience that may have left them feeling stripped of both.

The guide is designed to support victim service providers to enhance language access within their organizations by helping you create a language access plan for Deaf people. A Deaf language access plan is a document that spells out how, when, and what kind of services to provide to Deaf individuals in order for them to have access to your services, materials, and communication in a language that is readily understood by them

A note about our focus and language in this guide: We designed this guide to help victim service providers create more accessible and inclusive services for people who use sign language. Throughout this guide, we use the term Deaf to describe this group of people. However, it is important to note that there is great diversity in identity and language use.

Some people who identify themselves as Deaf do not use sign language and some people who identify themselves as hard of hearing do use sign language.

When creating a language access plan and providing accommodations, always focus on the needs of survivors and honor how each survivor identifies.

Another important distinction we make when using the word "Deaf" in this document is the difference between "deaf" and "Deaf." People who are culturally Deaf identify as members of a distinct cultural and linguistic group, rather than as people with disabilities. The uppercase "D" in "Deaf" is used to signify identification with Deaf culture, whereas a lowercase "d" in "deaf" reflects an audiological perspective defined by loss of hearing. Because Deaf people in the United States identify as a unique group and primarily use American Sign Language (ASL) or other forms of sign language that are distinct from English, we recommend victim service providers and organizations to place a central focus on gaining access to sign language interpreters, and interpreters who are Deaf themselves (Brickman and Hastings).

# About This Guide

This guide describes what language access means for Deaf individuals, why it matters, and provides concrete steps for how victim service providers and organizations can craft language access plans and engage qualified interpreters. At a minimum, the guidance offered here will help victim service providers and organizations meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This guide provides a road map as to how and when to secure qualified interpreters and helps victim service providers and organizations develop a streamlined process for doing so. Our goal is for you and your organization to strive to remove systemic barriers that Deaf survivors face when accessing services and systems made for hearing individuals.

## **Ensuring Accessibility in Victim Services for People with Disabilities and Deaf People: A Legal and Moral Imperative**

Victim services organizations play a crucial role in providing support, resources, and advocacy for individuals who have experienced trauma and crime. As we strive to serve all victims, it is imperative that these organizations are accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities and Deaf people. Not only is this accessibility mandated by law through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but it also aligns with mission and core values of the crime victims field.

The ADA, enacted in 1990, is a landmark civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability. It ensures that people with disabilities have equal access to public services, programs, and activities, which includes victim services. Under the ADA, victim services organizations must provide accessible facilities; offer reasonable accommodations; ensure effective communication with people who have hearing, vision, or speech disabilities; and modify policies, practices, and procedures to avoid discrimination and ensure equity. Failure to comply with the ADA not only violates federal law but also denies essential support and justice to a significant portion of the population who may be victims of crime.

Beyond legal obligations, victim services organizations have a mission-driven, ethical obligation to ensure accessibility. The field of victim services is founded on principles of empathy, inclusivity, equity, and justice. These principles demand that we extend our support to all victims, especially victims who experience barriers and marginalization, including victims with disabilities and Deaf people.

By providing accessible services, we uphold the value of inclusivity and work towards eliminating these barriers. When victims feel understood and accommodated, they are more likely to engage with the services offered, leading to better outcomes in their recovery journey. This support can be a critical factor in their ability to navigate the aftermath of crime and trauma. Organizations that prioritize accessibility also build trust and credibility within the community. Victims, advocates, and community members recognize and value the commitment to serving all individuals. This trust is essential for fostering a supportive environment where all victims feel safe and empowered to seek help.

By prioritizing accessibility, we not only comply with the ADA but also reaffirm our commitment to the values and mission that define the crime victims field. We ensure that every victim, regardless of ability and language, receives the support, justice, and compassion they deserve.



# Language Access Plans for Deaf People and Why They Matter

For the purposes of this guide, language access for Deaf individuals is defined as the process of ensuring that people who are Deaf are able to access information, programs, and services at a level equal to hearing individuals. A language access plan is a document that maps out how an organization will provide information and services to, and engage with, people who are Deaf.

Having a language access plan in place will help protect against the missteps and pitfalls that often arise from ad hoc responses to crisis situations and reduces the chances that a person will be denied critical information and services because of language barriers. A language access plan helps your organization recognize and meet the holistic experiences of Deaf people, both culturally and linguistically. The language access planning process serves as a tool to help any victim service staff and volunteers of your organization do the following:



Identify local Deaf communities



Identify all of the circumstances that require language access services



Determine capacity, unmet needs, and the necessary budget for providing various language access services



Map out policies, procedures, staff training, and other supports needed to implement language access



Determine a plan for monitoring and adapting

# **Eliminating Barriers, Reducing Harm**

## **Common Barriers to Services**

Research on victimization within the Deaf community suggests that Deaf individuals living in the United States have higher rates of domestic and sexual victimization than their hearing counterparts. Despite these higher rates of domestic and sexual violence, Deaf survivors face barriers that prevent them from getting help. When Deaf survivors reach out for services and support and their needs are not met, their experience of trauma is compounded by the very systems and services that are intended to help. It's important to consider these challenges and barriers when crafting a language access plan and when considering what trainings and resources can best support your staff in providing language access so that they can be overcome. The challenges that underlay these barriers include:

### **Invisibility**

Despite high rates of domestic and sexual violence within the Deaf community, it is largely invisible to victim service providers. Most providers have limited to no exposure to the Deaf community and haven't received specialized training on Deaf culture or domestic and sexual violence within the community. Without an awareness of Deaf people's unique needs and experiences, victim service providers do not commonly recognize this community as underserved or marginalized. Such recognition is what typically spurs communities and programs into action to remove linguistic and cultural barriers and enhance services for survivors from recognized communities.

### **Lack of Specialized Outreach by Victim Service Providers**

Victim service providers tend not to focus or tailor their outreach and education efforts to meet the needs of the Deaf community. Deaf people's unique experiences with domestic and sexual violence are rarely reflected in educational curriculum and outreach brochures. For example, it is common for domestic violence awareness trainings to include a list of abusive behaviors so potential victims can determine if they are in an abusive relationship.

The behaviors listed, however, rarely include those such as destroying video-phones and channeling physical abuse towards the victim's hands. Similarly, victim services outreach brochures rarely include Deaf-specific language or information, including the unique dynamics of abuse specific to the community and important information regarding accessibility, such as information on the availability of interpreters. Additionally, programs rarely conduct educational activities or leave outreach brochures where Deaf people are likely to congregate, such as Deaf schools, clubs, and Deaf community events.

## **Phone-Based Emergency Hotlines**

Those Deaf survivors who do reach out for assistance are often met with barriers that prevent a connection from being made. In most communities, for example, help—whether from an advocate or law enforcement officer—is only accessible by phone. For Deaf individuals, this means using a TTY to communicate by typing messages back and forth, but these methods are cumbersome, slow, and ineffective in an emergency.

Moreover, many Deaf individuals no longer use or own TTYs because of advances in technologies such as email, instant message, and videophones, and many victim service providers either no longer have TTY or don't know how to use it. Having a call relayed is also an option for Deaf individuals (Video Relay Service, VRS), but most law enforcement and victim services agencies are not prepared to receive relay calls (or TTY calls) and Deaf survivors commonly report being hung up on or never having their call answered at all.

## **Lack of Language Access**

Language access presents a significant barrier to Deaf survivors. Qualified ASL interpreters are rarely used to facilitate communication between Deaf survivors and law enforcement officers, advocates, and medical professionals. More commonly, Deaf survivors are forced to use ad hoc and often ineffective communication measures that present their own challenges: writing notes back and forth requires a level of fluency in and comfort with written English that many Deaf survivors do not possess; speech or lip reading is difficult for most Deaf survivors, imprecise, and can lead to confusion; and non-offending family members acting as interpreters can present problems. They often lack the skills and fluency to interpret the information being conveyed accurately and they are at risk of re-traumatization.

These ad hoc measures lead to miscommunication, missed information, and frustration in any circumstance, but they are particularly problematic in the context of domestic and sexual violence. It is difficult to exchange information in a person's non-native language in the best circumstances, and it becomes even more difficult if that person has experienced trauma, is in crisis, or if the information being conveyed is complex—all of which apply to Deaf survivors. Additionally, if this occurs in a setting where a formal legal record is being established, communication errors can derail an entire investigation.

In the rare instances when certified interpreters are used, they often do not have the proper qualifications or preparation to work in the context of domestic and sexual violence, which does not have a certification process of its own. Working within this context presents unique linguistic needs, practice considerations, and safety concerns for interpreters. Residential programs, such as domestic violence shelters, can't afford interpreters around the clock. Instead, they reserve them for high-priority events such as program orientations and case management meetings, making it difficult for advocates and Deaf survivors to have impromptu conversations as issues come up or for Deaf survivors to interact with other residents who often provide invaluable support.

## **Lack of Cultural Competency in Victim Services and Advocacy**

Without a deep understanding of Deaf culture and the unique cultural context of domestic and sexual violence within the Deaf community, it is difficult for hearing advocates and counselors to effectively safety plan with Deaf survivors, support Deaf survivors through the criminal or civil legal system, facilitate support groups involving Deaf survivors, and provide many of the other critical services Deaf survivors need in crisis and healing.

These advocates also play an important role in advancing justice for survivors by advocating to close gaps and address troubling trends in the responses of key systems—civil, criminal, medical—to domestic and sexual violence. Domestic violence programs and rape crisis centers cannot eliminate communication and cultural barriers without gaining expertise on the Deaf community, leaving Deaf survivors alone to navigate the systems involved in victims' lives on top of the trauma they have experienced.

# Language Access Planning: An Effective Strategy to Removing Barriers

Establishing and implementing a language access plan directly benefits Deaf people. The risk of doing harm is reduced when individuals have access to information and resources in a language they understand. Individuals will also be able to communicate better if they can use their own language, which means greater comfort in seeking help.

It's important to remember that although a person who is Deaf may have a working knowledge of English in written form, their level of proficiency in using English may not include being able to communicate complex and emotionally sensitive topics related to sexual victimization or trauma. In addition, when a Deaf person has experienced trauma or is in crisis, it can be particularly difficult to convey information in English, which is typically not a Deaf individual's first language. Speech and lip-reading are not a solution, as it is estimated that only 30-40% of speech sounds can be lip read, even under the best conditions ("Lip-Reading"). For the purposes of this guide, when language access for Deaf people is referenced, it does not include speech/lip reading and/or writing back and forth in English (Hope and Smith 14).



# Best Practices for Enhancing Your Capacity, Eliminating Barriers, and Reducing Harm

The following best practices should be integrated into your language access planning and the language access plan itself:

- Build relationships with Deaf organizations and the Deaf community in your service area, including planned outreach and engagement events
  - Attend local Deaf community events
  - Invite the local Deaf community to your events
  - Reach out to local Deaf organizations for potential partnerships
- Work with members of the Deaf community to educate staff on the local Deaf community and culture, and domestic and sexual violence against Deaf people
  - Invite Deaf community members and educators to your organization to provide trainings
- Develop an understanding of audism, exploring its role in the barriers Deaf survivors face, and engage in a process of becoming hearing allies to the Deaf community
  - This will build from your new relationships with the Deaf organizations in your community
    - Receive their guidance, remain open to learning about how audism creates harm in our society
- Review the accessibility of your physical, communication, information, policy, and attitudinal environments to identify barriers for Deaf people and create plans to remove them. This should be part of your language access plan
  - Go to Activating Change's resource on training and assessment in the Resource section of this guide to help you get started

- Establish agreements with interpreter agencies to ensure qualified, trauma-informed interpreters are available, especially during nights and weekends
  - Seek guidance from your local Deaf community and Activating Change to help find reliable, reputable, and quality interpreting agencies in your local community
- Find money (often by including costs related to accommodations in grant proposal budgets) to cover the costs of auxiliary aids or other accommodations, such as sign language interpreters, that create equal access for Deaf survivors, staff and volunteers, and community partners.\*Note: Interpreters and CART are often allowable expenses in government grants for victim services\*
  - Go to “Budgeting for Language Access” in the next section, and our tip sheets in the resource section of this guide to get you started
- Create captioned videos and videos that are interpreted into sign language to communicate critical information about your services that have previously only been available in writing
  - If your budget allows for it, we recommend hiring a service to produce post-production captions
  - If you currently do not have a budget to pay for post-production captions, you can use a number of free caption generators
    - Free AI captions
    - You will have to edit, as AI captions are only 80% accurate
  - You should still create a plan to secure funding in the future to pay for post-production captioning

\*Statements in this section, Eliminating Barriers, Reducing Harm, were taken as excerpts from, “Culture, Language, and Access: Key Considerations for Serving Deaf Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence,” written by Charity Hope and Nancy Smith, January 2015.

# Budgeting for Language Access

It is imperative to always incorporate the cost of Deaf language access into your organization's budget for victim services. This language access includes, but is not limited to: sign language interpreters, closed captioning for materials such as critical information available on your website via video and audio, and communication access real-time translation (CART) services. Critical Information can also include orientation to shelter living, how to access your organization's services, etc., which all need to be made accessible for Deaf survivors and victims. In order to effectively plan and budget for sign language interpreters and Deaf Interpreters, it's important to consider these factors and action steps:

1. Assess your organization's history and future services to Deaf and Hard of Hearing survivors
  - a. Review your organization's history of using sign language interpreters, captioning, and CART services
2. Consider the diversity and size of the Deaf community in your area
  - a. Check out the National Association of the Deaf's statewide coordinating council resource to get you started, found in the resource section of this guide
3. If you anticipate serving more Deaf survivors, increase your average annual spend on interpreters by 15-20%; this allows you to plan for future growth
4. Include budgeting for outreach to the Deaf Community, and language access for those outreach efforts
  - a. Host events and informational sessions about your services for the Deaf community and provide interpreters and other access such as CART to ensure accessibility for Deaf individuals that attend



Start tracking services to Deaf survivors and interpreting use now to better estimate expenses in future years.

For many organizations and victim service providers, it may be the case that budgeting for language access and hiring sign language interpreters is new. In these cases, if you do not have a history of serving Deaf survivors, start by including 50 hours of interpreting services for the year. In addition, we recommend budgeting 10% more over actual usage each year. Forecasting an extra 10% over actual usage for each subsequent year will enable the organization to be prepared to meet higher demands for services as people become aware that those services exist.

## **Key Considerations for Budgeting for Sign Language and Deaf Interpreters**

- The average approximate cost range for sign language interpreters across the country is \$50-\$125/hour
- For remote interpreting assignments, many sign language interpreters have a 1-hour minimum
- For in-person interpreting assignments, many sign language interpreters have a 2-hour minimum and may require payment for travel time and travel-related expenses
- If your meeting is more than an hour, the topics are complex or nuanced, or the Deaf survivor has unique communication needs, it is standard industry practice to hire a team of two interpreters to ensure full language access
- You may also need a Deaf Interpreter to team with a hearing interpreting team if the Deaf survivor has unique communication needs- this means budgeting and paying for four interpreters
- See Activating Change's Webinar: Effectively Working with Sign Language Interpreters in the resource section of this guide

# Choosing A Deaf Language Access Coordinator

When planning for language access, it is helpful to designate a staff position as the main coordinator/point of contact for language access for the Deaf individuals served or potentially served. We've found that having a main point person creates a clear organizational expectation around language access planning, streamlines the language access planning process, and ensures staff always have a designated person to go to with questions regarding language access. Suggested responsibilities for the coordinator include, but are not limited to:

- **Taking the lead on language access planning for your organization**
- **Serving as a liaison between outside resources and your organization.**
- **Completing the Language Access Plan template, included in appendix B**
- **Coordinating regular language access trainings for staff**
- **Contributing to budget planning for language access**
- **Researching local Deaf resources and organizations for potential collaboration**
- **Depending on the size of the organization, forming a committee with representatives from each department who are responsible for developing policies/procedures**
- **Delegating roles and responsibilities for staff as they relate to providing language access to Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals**

- **Engaging in outreach events/activities targeted for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community**
- **Determining a plan for monitoring language access and quality control**

The ultimate goal of the Deaf Language Access Coordinator is to ensure that language access is woven into the entire organization. If the Language Access Coordinator were to leave, remaining staff will still know policy, procedure, what to do and how to respond when a Deaf or Hard of Hearing survivor is seeking services.



# Assessing Needs

Before creating a concrete language access plan, it's important to collect information about your local Deaf community and the individuals you currently or potentially will serve. This will give your organization an idea of some of the barriers your local Deaf community faces, as well as commonly shared experiences among members and unique cultural elements to consider.

As stated previously, the Deaf community is one with its own culture and language and has a rich history. The individuals who are members of the Deaf community share common experiences that result from being a linguistic and cultural minority, thus shaping the lenses with which they view the world. Therefore, when planning for language access for Deaf individuals, the, “language,” element isn't the only piece that needs to be accounted for. History, culture, and lived oppression also play an important role in providing equal access.

## Deaf Schools

Deaf schools and Deaf residential schools play an important role in the Deaf community. They are where the rich history and culture of the Deaf community is shared and passed down to each generation, where sign language is freely used and understood, and where Deaf children can grow and learn from Deaf adult role models. They often employ a large number of Deaf individuals, and therefore the communities in which a Deaf school exists will also typically contain a large number of local Deaf residents. If your organization is located in the vicinity of a Deaf school, you should plan to serve a higher number of Deaf individuals.

### Factors to Consider

- Is there a local Deaf school in your area?
  - Demographics of that population
  - Age of possible Deaf survivors to be served and what that means for your organization
    - Serving minors
      - Background checks for staff and volunteers

## For-Deaf-by-Deaf Organizations

For Deaf, by Deaf programs are a best practice for serving Deaf communities. They are designed and run by members of Deaf communities. They provide services- emergency hotlines, crisis intervention, advocacy, peer support, and community education- in sign language. They integrate Deaf cultural values and traditions into all aspects of the organization and programming. And, they leverage strengths in Deaf culture and communities to support Deaf people. Unfortunately, there is a severe shortage of For-Deaf-by-Deaf services in the United States. If one such organization does exist in your local community, partnering with them and letting them know that your service is available and accessible is mutually beneficial.

### Factors to Consider

- What For-Deaf-by-Deaf local organizations exist in your region?
  - Are they aware of your services and how to reach you?
  - How can you best collaborate?



If you answered no to the above question and you are not currently serving Deaf victims, what activities are planned to conduct outreach? What efforts are planned to engage Deaf communities and build partnerships with organizations that serve Deaf individuals? Part of building relationships with the local Deaf community includes building trust. That can take some time.

Additional considerations:

- How will your organization let the Deaf community know your services are available and accessible?
  - Signs
  - Social Media
  - Vlogs
  - “I use sign language” cards available in office

# Types of Language Access

Another important aspect of language access planning is to consider what types of language access you will provide, and what each form of access entails. It's important to remember that while we must consider all aspects of language access, the Deaf survivor's preferences should be honored and respected first and foremost. If a Deaf survivor prefers a remote interpreter rather than an in-person interpreter for anonymity purposes, the goal of survivor-centered language access planning must be to provide that survivor with the access they request and require. Language access at its heart is survivor centric. Therefore, our view is not a "one size fits all," but rather, one that honors a survivor's choices and needs.

## Factors to Consider

- Hiring qualified, trauma-informed sign language interpreters
- Hiring qualified Deaf Interpreters to team with hearing sign language interpreters
- Making Video Remote Interpretation (VRI) available
  - Do you have the required technology to make VRI a viable option?
    - High speed internet
    - Computer or tablet is preferred
    - Web camera
    - Speakers or clear audio device
- In person
  - Factor in possible cost of travel for interpreters
- Do you know where to find qualified, trauma-informed sign language interpreters in your area?
  - Have you identified an interpreter agency/freelance interpreters in your area?
  - Have you asked your local Deaf community which agencies are reputable and provide qualified interpreters?
    - Are there any agencies they would not recommend contracting with?
- Making your organization's materials and resources accessible
  - Providing closed captions for any video material, webinars, presentations, and audio that's included on your website

## Factors to Consider Continued

- Providing CART services for individuals that may prefer to see verbatim spoken word translated into real-time text
  - During live presentations, having CART services available with a projector so that individuals can read the spoken English in real time.
    - Considered an alternative or supplement to ASL that those who are more comfortable using written English may prefer

### Budgeting

Part of the language access planning and assessment phase also includes budgeting for language access services. Go to the “Budgeting for Language Access” for more specific information and guidance.

### Designating a Language Access Coordinator

Another part of the planning and assessment phase is creating or designating a position within your organization responsible for handling language access coordination. This position will be your Deaf Language Access Coordinator. Go to the “Choosing a Deaf Language Access Coordinator” section for more in depth guidance and an explanation of responsibilities.



# Developing a Language Access Plan

Now you are ready to commence planning. Before you complete Activating Change's "Language Access Plan Template," it is important for your organization to understand the purpose of the language access plan and its desired outcome. For the purposes of this guide, and in reference specifically to the Deaf communities served, the purpose and desired impact of this language access plan is as follows:

**Purpose and Desired Impact: For organizations to have a sustainable, long-term plan to ensure services are accessible and equitable for Deaf people, and that they are provided with the accommodations they require. Organizations will have a shareable/published language access plan that is accessible to all internally and publicly.**

- The organization will designate one staff position to be the Deaf Language Access Coordinator
- The organization will commit to budgeting for language access
- The organization will regularly train staff on language access, including the necessary authority to utilize access measures
- The organization will engage in outreach and relationship building activities with the Deaf community
- The organization will seek to build partnerships with local Deaf resources
- The organization will monitor and evaluate the quality of the language access they provide, regularly seeking ways to improve

# Supporting Staff Through Implementation

To identify staff training needs, organizations should consider the following:

- What level of training is required for different types of employees? Consider their role and the level of contact they will have with Deaf survivors:
  - Case managers
  - Supervisors
  - Counselors
  - Advocates
  - Contractors
  - Volunteers
- What tools and resources can your organization make available to make it easier to provide ongoing language access? These may include, but not be limited to:
  - Interpreted/Captioned materials
  - Procedures for securing an in-person interpreter
    - All staff should be clear about whom to contact to arrange for an interpreter to come to the organization
    - Staff should know which permissions and/or notifications are needed before making an interpreter request, if any
    - Staff should be aware of where interpreters will provide services
    - Staff should understand any specific entry and security requirements for interpreters
- Procedures for facilitating video remote interpretation (VRI)
  - All staff should know how the equipment and technology works and where it is stored
  - All staff should know who to contact if they have questions or problems with the equipment and technology

Activating Change has many resources and tools available to help your organization's staff begin (or enhance) its language access planning. These resources can be viewed in the Resources section of this guide, which also includes a link to Activating Change's Resource Library on the End Abuse of People with Disabilities website.



It is important to note that while some organizations may have staff that are bilingual and can communicate in both spoken English and sign language, these individuals may not be trained, qualified, professional sign language interpreters. Organizations should always seek the services of a qualified, professional sign language interpreter when engaging in communication and providing services to and for survivors who are Deaf.



# Monitoring and Adapting

All plans for language access must be monitored regularly for what has worked well, what needs improving, and what needs to be changed. Organizations should develop a plan for monitoring how well they are meeting the language access needs for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals being served. Part of that monitoring and quality control should include gathering feedback from Deaf and Hard of Hearing survivors being served, the sign language interpreters and entities used in providing language access, and staff who have engaged with the above mentioned parties.

The plan for monitoring and quality control should also include statistics on use, including but not limited to:

- Number of requests for interpreters
  - Sign language interpreters and Deaf interpreters
- Length of time to obtain interpreter services
- Number of interpreter hours
- Number of materials made accessible
  - Captioning
  - Interpreted videos, presentations, webinars
  - CART
- Number of accessible materials accessed
  - Captioning
  - Interpreted videos, presentations, webinars
  - CART

These statistics can help inform the following years' budgets and help with anticipating and planning for ongoing needs. There should also be a plan that, as materials are updated in your organization, so will the accessible versions of those materials.



Organizations should determine how often (such as yearly or biannually) this analysis should take place and then adhere to the schedule. Ensuring regular and ongoing analysis of language access use will help organizations forecast and meet needs as those needs expand or otherwise change.

# Conclusion

Your organization is ready to plan for language access and increase your capacity to serve Deaf victims and survivors. Your next step is drafting a language access plan tailored to your current and prospective needs as you grow your capacity in serving Deaf survivors. By increasing your capacity to serve Deaf survivors and victims via language access, you are creating a space where Deaf people have access to potentially life-saving support, resources, and aid.



# Appendix A: Critical Concepts for Language Access Planning

## **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):**

A law that requires state and local governments, businesses, and nonprofit organizations that serve the public to be able to effectively communicate with people that have “communication disabilities.” While the goal of any language access plan is to provide survivors with the highest level of trauma-informed care, it is also important to note that your organization is also legally required to provide access. Entities are required to provide an auxiliary aide or service, which often includes interpreter services, to ensure that communication is as effective as communication with people who do not have disabilities. The goal is to ensure that communication with people who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing - and those with disabilities - is as effective as communication with hearing people and those without disabilities (Brickman and Hastings). While the ADA is a legal requirement, it suggests the very minimum that an organization can provide to ensure access for Deaf individuals. There exists a body of best practices that build on the ADA to provide access to Deaf people. These best practices, which are described in the section of this guide titled “Eliminating Barriers, Reducing Harm,” should be woven into your language access plan.

## **American Sign Language (ASL):**

American Sign Language is a natural language that serves as the predominant sign language of Deaf communities in the United States and most of Anglophone Canada. ASL is a complete and organized visual language expressed by employing both manual and non-manual features. It has its own distinct grammar and syntax.

## **Audism:**

Audism is an attitude based on prejudiced thinking that results in a negative stigma toward anyone who does not hear; like racism or sexism, audism judges, labels, and limits individuals based on whether a person hears and speaks.

## **Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART):**

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) converts the spoken word into instant text. This service can be for (but is not limited to) Hard of Hearing persons who may not be familiar with sign language, that need to translate spoken words

into printed English in a real-time format, or Deaf individuals who prefer to read the exact words being spoken.

### **Closed Captioning:**

Closed captions are a textual representation of the audio within a media file. They make video accessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing people by providing a time-to-text track as a supplement to, or as a substitute for, the audio.

### **Qualified Deaf Interpreter/Certified Deaf Interpreter:**

A Deaf Interpreter is a specialist who provides interpreting, translation, and transliteration services in American Sign Language and other visual and tactual communication forms used by individuals who are Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and Deaf-Blind. Qualified Deaf Interpreters have specialized training that has allowed them to be able to provide a language match to Deaf sign language users who may have unique communication needs, non-native fluency, intellectual disabilities, etc. As a Deaf person, the Deaf Interpreter starts with a distinct set of formative linguistic, cultural, unique communication needs, non-native fluency, intellectual disabilities, etc. As a Deaf person, the Deaf Interpreter starts with a distinct set of formative linguistic, cultural, and life experiences that enables nuanced comprehension and interaction in a wide range of visual language and communication forms influenced by region, culture, age, literacy, education, class, and physical, cognitive, and mental health. These experiences coupled with professional training give the Deaf interpreter the ability to effect successful communication across all types of interpreted interactions, both routine and high risk. In many situations, use of a Deaf Interpreter enables a level of linguistic and cultural bridging that is often not possible when hearing ASL-English interpreters work alone.

Deaf Interpreters (DI) work in a team with qualified hearing interpreters with the goal of effective communication and trauma-informed communication. Within victim services, the goal is for the Deaf survivor to be able to express themselves at ease without concern of miscommunication.

### **Qualified Hearing Interpreter:**

A qualified hearing interpreter is one who can interpret accurately, effectively, and impartially, and use specialized vocabulary, as needed. ASL interpreters require specialized training to effectively interpret in courtrooms and domestic and sexual violence contexts. This training covers vocabulary specific to domestic and sexual violence, trauma and communication, ethics, safety planning, and self-care.

A qualified hearing interpreter is professionally trained to provide the service and adhere to a professional code of ethics, including impartiality, accuracy, and confidentiality. They must be proficient in the source language (English) and target language (ASL). They must be able to interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially, both receptively and expressively, using any necessary specialized vocabulary. They must be able to engage in cognitive tasks simultaneously, and demonstrate competency and knowledge of terms associated with victim services, trauma, violence, abuse, etc. Qualified interpreters should also have knowledge and use of cultural nuances, regional variations, idiomatic expressions, and colloquialisms in sign language (Brickman and Hastings).

A qualified hearing interpreter working with Deaf minors or Deaf individuals that may have unique language usage, or are not native to using ASL, should know how to interpret in plain language. Age-appropriate terminology should be utilized. It is important that they are comfortable working with Deaf Interpreters in situations that involve minors and situations in which the Deaf individual has unique language usage. Some professional interpreters carry certifications that qualify them to interpret in specialized environments, such as the court system. Interpreters who hold the National Interpreter Certification (NIC) have demonstrated general knowledge in the field of interpreting, ethical decision-making, and interpreting skills (“National Interpreter Certification”).

### **Video Remote Interpreting (VRI):**

Video remote interpreting (VRI) is a form of sign language interpreting that allows people who are Deaf to communicate with a hearing person at the same site via videoconferencing instead of live, on-site interpreting.



# Appendix B: Language Access Template

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Organization:** \_\_\_\_\_

The following document is our organization's Language Access Plan. It is intended to provide a sustainable, long-term solution to ensure services are accessible and equitable for Deaf people, and that they are provided with the accommodations they require when utilizing our services. This Language Access Plan is intended as an informational and instructional document to inform staff's decision-making when tasked with providing language access for Deaf individuals.

This language access plan is designed to provide staff, volunteers, and anyone who interacts with our organization with an understanding of our commitment to language access for Deaf people, and will help meet our organization's mission by:

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## Budgeting

**The budget includes financial resources to support language access services specifically for Deaf individuals, including:**

This is where you list this current fiscal year's budget for sign language interpreters, outreach to the Deaf Community, CART and captioning services, etc. Be specific as possible, so that anyone who reads this plan can understand how much money is allocated for Deaf language access. Note: Lack of financial resources in the budget is not an acceptable reason for not providing accommodations.

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## Services and Protocol

**The following language access services are available to Deaf individuals who seek services at our organization:**

This is where you list what you currently have in place: in-person sign language interpreters, an interpreting agency you contract with, Deaf interpreters, Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) and the name of that service provider, captioning and CART services for trainings and presentations, etc.

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**The protocol staff follow to determine when an individual needs a sign language interpreter are as follows:**

This is where you list out your specific process for assessing if an individual needs a sign language interpreter and/or a Deaf Interpreter. Do you have communication cards, a sign that says interpreters are available that a Deaf person can point to, etc.?

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**The following information is how our organization secures trauma-informed sign language interpreters and dictates who in this organization is responsible for making interpreting requests:**

This is where you provide the names, phone numbers, and email addresses of the individual interpreters you contract with, or the agency you have an agreement with that's responsible for providing you with interpreters. You can list a step-by-step process that staff (or designated individual) use to secure interpreters. Be specific as possible so anyone can follow these instructions. You also explain how much advanced notice an interpreter needs to be requested depending on the agency's policies.

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## **Staff and Training**

**The following staff members will receive language access training specifically regarding working with Deaf individuals:**

This is where you list each staff role: frontline staff, administrative staff, managers, supervisors, volunteers, etc.

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## **The types of training staff members will receive consist of:**

For example, “staff will attend a 2-hour, in-person training and receive an email reminding them of our language access policies and procedures. The staff training will occur...”

This is where you describe how often you will train staff regarding language access for Deaf individuals. Remember to include as much detail as possible, such as specific resources and information like Activating Change’s webinar and tip sheets, information on how to request interpreters, how to budget for interpreters, secure captioning, how to get materials interpreted, etc.

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## **Next Steps**

\_\_\_\_\_ (insert staffs’ names/roles) will be responsible for reviewing and updating this language access plan. The plan will be reviewed \_\_\_\_\_ (insert how often you will review the plan). During the language access plan review, the following will be assessed:

This is where you list out how your plan to assess your language access plan, and the following factors: current Deaf populations in your service area, the frequency of encounters your organization has with Deaf individuals, availability of resources, whether staff know and understand the language access plan and how to implement it, whether identified sources for assistance are still available and viable, budgeting information such as how much was spent on language access, if there was a surplus or deficit, and budget planning that will occur. You want to assess the quality of language access services you are providing. You can also list what local Deaf community resources are available.

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**Following the assessment, we will address our findings in this manner:**

This is where you list out how your organization will adapt and change what isn't working and make improvements upon what is working. This can and should include budget information as well.

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**The following information details what type of outreach our organization will do within the Deaf community:**

This is where you list your plan for outreach, which can include posting accessible information on your website including videos that are captioned and interpreted, making social media posts with visible interpreters, setting up booths at various Deaf events letting people know your services are accessible to the Deaf community, etc.

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# Appendix C: Questions to Ask Sign Language Interpreting Agencies



What is the agency's screening and hiring process look like when hiring sign language interpreters?

- What qualifications and credentials are required/preferred?



Does the agency hire nationally certified (NIC or BEI) or state-licensed interpreters?



Does the agency have a list of qualified mental health interpreting trained interpreters?

- If yes, how many are on the roster?



Does the agency have a list of interpreters with specialist certification to work in legal settings (SC:L)?

- If yes, how many are on the roster?



Does the agency have interpreters experienced in interpreting in trauma-informed settings?



Does the agency recognize trauma-sensitive practices, and promote the development of best practices regarding being trauma-sensitive?



Does the agency have video remote interpreting (VRI) services?



Does the agency have a list of Deaf Interpreters/Certified Deaf Interpreters?



What is the agency's cancellation policy?



What are the agency's rates and terms regarding:

- General and specialty interpreting services
- Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) services
- Travel



# Appendix D: Determining if an Interpreter is Qualified

A Qualified Interpreter...	A Non-Qualified Interpreter...
Is able to articulate clearly in both languages	Cannot articulate clearly in both languages and struggles with the interpretation process
Will pause and ask for clarification in either language when necessary	Will not pause and ask for clarifications, even when the consumer(s) seem confused
Interprets everything, including side conversations, curse words, insults, and environmental noises	Does not interpret everything in the setting, picks and chooses what gets interpreted
Maintains neutrality. Does not interject opinions, bias, or favoritism towards particular individuals in the setting while interpreting	Does not remain neutral. Interjects opinions and biases, exhibits favoritism in setting while interpreting
Corrects themselves when interpreting errors are made, and informs consumers of the interpreting error	Does not pause to correct errors; does not inform consumers about interpreting errors
Does not summarize or simplify information given	Summarizes and paraphrases information, omitting important details

A Qualified Interpreter...	A Non-Qualified Interpreter...
Will not accept interpreting assignment if the consumer is not comfortable due to past experiences, unmatched skillset, linguistic struggles, or discomfort for any reason	Will accept an interpreting assignment regardless of inappropriate or unmatched skillset, judgements or opinions that could impede work performance and the ability to maintain impartiality
Checks in during breaks to make sure everyone is getting the information and asks if adjustments are needed	Does not check in or is unwilling to receive feedback in order to make appropriate adjustments
Uses first person as a conduit and refers to themselves as “the interpreter” to ask any clarifying questions	Uses third person when interpreting
Defers to the Deaf consumer regarding interpreter placement, linguistic preferences, etc.	Makes decisions regarding interpreter placement and linguistic preferences without checking in with the Deaf consumer



# Resources

## Webinars/Online Trainings

- Just Ask: A Toolkit to Help Advocates Meet the Needs of Crime Victims with Disabilities:
  - <https://www.EndAbusePWD.org/resource/just-ask-a-toolkit-to-help-advocates-meet-the-needs-of-crime-victims-with-disabilities/>
- Providing Sign Language Interpreting Course:
  - <https://www.EndAbusePWD.org/courses/providing-sign-language-interpretation/>
- Supporting Deaf and DeafBlind Survivors:
  - <https://ReachingVictim.wpengine.com/resource/working-with-deaf-deafblind-survivors/>
- Understanding Your Organization's Strengths and Barriers to Effectively Serving Deaf Survivors:
  - <https://www.EndAbusePWD.org/tools-and-training/assessment/>

## Tip Sheets

- Language Access Planning for Deaf People: A Toolkit:
  - <https://www.EndAbusePWD.org/resource/language-access-planning-for-deaf-people-a-toolkit/>
  - Includes:
    - Budgeting for Language Access Tip Sheet
    - Finding Qualified Interpreters: Questions to Ask Sign Language Interpreting Agencies
    - Determining if a Sign Language Interpreter is Qualified
    - HEAL of Tri-County Interpreter Screening Guide

## Websites

- Activating Change:
  - [ActivatingChange.org](https://ActivatingChange.org)
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, to find certified interpreters in your area:
  - [RID.org](https://RID.org)
- National Association of the Deaf's (NAD) statewide council, to help assess the diversity and size of the Deaf community in your area:
  - <https://www.NAD.org/resources/directories/state-agencies-of-deaf-hoh>

# Citations

Brickman, Jannette, and Allison Hastings. “Developing a PREA-Compliant Language Access Plan for Incarcerated People Who Are Limited English Proficient.” National PREA Resource Center, 2020. <https://www.endabusepwd.org/resource/9539/>.

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<https://www.endabusepwd.org/resource/culture-language-and-access-serving-deaf-survivors/>.

“Lip-Reading.” National Deaf Children’s Society, 2024.  
<https://www.ndcs.org.uk/information-and-support/language-and-communication/spoken-language/supporting-speaking-and-listening/lip-reading/>. Accessed 15 April 2024.

“National Interpreter Certification: About the NIC Certification.” Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2024. <https://rid.org/certification/available-certifications/>. Accessed 15 April 2024.

## About Us

Activating Change is committed to activating people and organizations across movements to end violence against people with disabilities and Deaf people through a shared, intersectional framework. We bring together people from disability and victim services organizations, strengthen their capacity to work at the intersection of disability and survivor advocacy, and support them working together to achieve safety and justice for people with disabilities and Deaf people.

## Contact Us

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