



## **ADA Guide for Firefighters and EMS Personnel** *Communicating with People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing*

Often an individual who is deaf writes on a pad of paper to communicate with a first responder. As a first responder, you can expect to come into contact with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. It is estimated that up to nine percent of the population has some degree of hearing loss, and this percentage will increase as the population ages.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), people who are deaf or hard of hearing are entitled to the same services firefighters & EMS personnel provide to anyone else. They may not be excluded or segregated from services, be denied services, or otherwise be treated differently than other people. Fire houses/stations & ambulance companies must make efforts to ensure that their personnel communicate effectively with people whose disability affects hearing. This applies to both sworn and civilian personnel.

Your firehouse or company has adopted a specific policy regarding communicating with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. It is important to become familiar with this policy.

### **Requirements for Effective Communication**

#### ***The ADA requires that . . .***

- Arson investigators must provide the communication aids and services needed to communicate effectively with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, except when a particular aid or service would result in an undue burden or a fundamental change in the nature of the investigation being undertaken. EMS personnel should call ahead to admissions or ER to request an interpreter for a patient who is deaf, if requested and if a patient who is hard of hearing requests assistance, this request is to be relayed to the hospital to which the patient is going.
- Fire stations & ambulance companies must give primary consideration to providing the aid or service requested by the person with the hearing disability.
- Fire stations & ambulance companies cannot charge the person for the communication aids or services provided.
- Fire stations & ambulance companies do not have to provide personally prescribed devices such as hearing aids.
- When interpreters are needed, fire stations & ambulance companies must provide information to hospitals accepting accident/fire victims so that interpreters who can interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially may be contacted and brought in.

- Only the chief of the fire station/ambulance company or his or her designee can make the determination that a particular aid or service would cause an undue burden or a fundamental change in the nature of the services being provided.

Your fire station/ambulance company policy should explain how to obtain interpreters or other communication aids and services when needed.

### **Communicating with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

Firefighters, arson investigators, & EMS personnel may find a variety of communication aids and services useful in different situations:

- Speech supplemented by gestures and visual aids can be used in some cases.
- A pad and pencil, a word processor, or a typewriter can be used to exchange written notes.
- A teletypewriter (TTY, also known as a TDD) can be used to exchange written messages over the telephone.
- An assistive listening system or device to amplify sound can be used when speaking with a person who is hard of hearing.
- A sign language interpreter can be used when speaking with a person who knows sign language.
- An oral interpreter can be used when speaking with a person who has been trained to speech read (read lips). Note: Do not assume that speech reading will be effective in most situations. On average, only about one third of spoken words can be understood by speech reading.

The type of situation, as well as the individual's abilities, will determine which aid or service is needed to communicate effectively.

### **Practical Suggestions for Communicating Effectively**

- Before speaking, get the person's attention with a wave of the hand or a gentle tap on the shoulder.
- Face the person and do not turn away while speaking.
- Try to converse in a well-lit area.
- Do not cover your mouth or chew gum.
- If a person is wearing a hearing aid, do not assume the individual can hear you.
- Minimize background noise and other distractions whenever possible.
- When you are communicating orally, speak slowly and distinctly, but do not exaggerate. Use gestures and facial expressions to reinforce what you are saying.

- Use visual aids when possible, such as pointing to printed information on a consent form or other document.
- Remember that only about one third of spoken words can be understood by speech reading.
- When communicating by writing notes, keep in mind that some individuals who use sign language may lack good English reading and writing skills.
- If someone with a hearing disability cannot understand you, write a note to ask him or her what communication aid or service is needed.
- If a sign language interpreter is requested, be sure to ask which language the person uses. American Sign Language (ASL) and Signed English are the most common.
- When you are interviewing a witness or a suspect (arson) or engaging in any complex conversation with a person whose primary language is sign language, a qualified interpreter is usually needed to ensure effective communication.
- When using an interpreter, look at and speak directly to the deaf person, not to the interpreter.
- Talk at your normal rate, or slightly slower if you normally speak very fast.
- Only one person should speak at a time.
- Use short sentences and simple words.
- Do not use family members or children as interpreters. They may lack the vocabulary or the impartiality needed to interpret effectively.

### **What Situations Require an Interpreter?**

Generally, interpreter services are not required for simple transactions – such as checking BP for someone with heat exhaustion or giving directions to a location – or for urgent situations – such as evacuating a burning building.

Example: You respond to a car accident in which one car has rear-ended another. A small amount of fuel has spilled on the ground, but there is no danger of fire, and the driver/passengers have only minor injuries. You need to ask the driver of one of the cars, who is deaf, some routine questions. The individual is able to understand the reason for the questions because you have written them on a piece of paper.

Example: You have been dispatched to the scene of an accident in which a minivan hit a school bus head on. The gas tank on the bus ruptured and gasoline is spreading rapidly on the road. The driver and all of the students on the bus are from a local school for the Deaf. It is imperative to evacuate all passengers from both vehicles as quickly as possible. Due to the urgency of the situation, it is acceptable to write a note to the bus driver, to explain where he and the children should go in order to be out of danger.

Furthermore, in order to triage injuries, EMS personnel may use gestures or notes to ask initial questions. Once the patients arrive at a hospital though, it is best to have an interpreter present.

However, an interpreter may be needed in lengthy or complex transactions – such as interviewing a victim, witness, suspect, or arrestee – if the person is being interviewed normally relies on sign language or speech reading to understand what others are saying.

**Example:** An arson investigator is interviewing the employees of a business that has had a suspicious fire. The investigator begins questioning them by writing notes, but their responses indicate a lack of comprehension. They request a sign language interpreter. In this situation, an interpreter should be called.

*It is inappropriate to ask a family member or companion to interpret in a situation like this because emotional ties may interfere with the ability to interpret impartially.*

**Example:** An EMT responds to the scene of a car accident where a man has been seriously injured. The man is conscious, but is unable to comprehend the officer's questions because he is deaf. A family member who is present begins interpreting what the EMT is saying.

A family member or companion may be used to interpret in a case like this, where the parties are willing, the need for information is urgent, and the questions are basic and uncomplicated. However, in general, do not expect or demand that a deaf person provide his or her own interpreter. *As a rule, when interpreter service is needed, it must be provided by the hospital to which the EMS personnel are taking the patient.*

For further information on the Americans with Disabilities Act contact:

**ADA Website**

[www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov)

ADA Information Line

800-514-0301 (voice)

800-514-0383 (TTY)

This pamphlet was developed by the US Department of Justice and modified by the FR-DAT office.

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January 2012