

## **The Urgent Need to Provide Effective Communication Access in Our Communities**

By Jonathan O'Dell, Assistive Technology Manager/Training Specialist  
Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

As COVID-19 has continued to impact our communities, simple and effective communication is vitally important to all citizens.

Public announcements are most effective when they are accessible to all residents. Many state and local leaders have prioritized this, and have included American Sign Language interpreters next to the podium and close captioning on the screens.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 – and various other federal and state laws – mandate the provision of these forms of communication access by state and local government entities. The current COVID-19 public health emergency highlights the necessity of providing communication access because of the danger the coronavirus poses to our citizens, and especially to more vulnerable residents who are older or are immunocompromised.

As you communicate with your communities, we urge you to be mindful of residents who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

According to figures published by the [Cochlear Center for Hearing and Public Health](#) at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, there are 38.2 million individuals with hearing loss in the United States. While hearing loss occurs at any age, the incidence of hearing loss rises sharply from 13.3% among the 50-59 age group, to 50% of those aged 70-79, and fully 81% of those 80 and older.

**As a general benchmark, one out of every five individuals over the age of 12 in any given community has unilateral hearing loss, and one out of every eight has a bilateral hearing loss significant enough to impede communication.**

In Massachusetts, there are many resources available to help communicators take these steps. The Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing can help.

You can make your public communications more accessible by making your multimedia press conferences, press releases, written pronouncements and guidelines accessible via American Sign Language and closed captioning.

### **VRI, VRS and CART**

There are also strategies you can employ to make virtual events more accessible, such as video remote interpreting (VRI: a remotely situated interpreter joins a videoconference call and interprets everything that is said by the hearing person into ASL, and voices what the Deaf participant signs in response), video relay service (VRS: [link to the](#)

[Federal Communications Commission](#)), and remote text transcription (CART - [Communication Access Realtime Translation](#)).

### **Visual communication tool**

To help medical professionals and first responders communicate at a time when we're advised to cover our faces, we developed a visual communication tool that can ease interactions with Deaf and hard of hearing patients when interpreters/CART are not available and time is of the essence. It is also suitable for people who may be non-verbal or whose first language is one other than English. You can download it here:

<https://www.mass.gov/service-details/covid-19-card>.

### **ASL, CART and interpreter requests**

You can learn more about how to incorporate ASL and CART access into your announcement/in-person services/virtual event preparations – and actually make requests – at [www.mass.gov/how-to/request-an-interpreter](http://www.mass.gov/how-to/request-an-interpreter).

### **General information**

For general information on Deafness and hearing loss, we have a free downloadable book available at

[www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/10/16/modern\\_guide\\_hearing\\_loss.pdf](http://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2019/10/16/modern_guide_hearing_loss.pdf).

We realize that individual communities and events may require specific guidance that are not easy to address in a general communication. If, after visiting the listed resources, you have questions that are not addressed, please feel free to address specific questions to [Jonathan.Odell@mass.gov](mailto:Jonathan.Odell@mass.gov).