

# GUIDE FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

*When In Contact With People  
Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing*



As a law enforcement officer, you can expect to come into contact with people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 prohibits State and local government from discriminating against an individual with a disability. Municipal and State police and county sheriff departments are bound by this Federal law. Your office has adopted a more detailed policy regarding law enforcement officers' communication with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. You should become familiar with this policy.

**What does title II require of you when interacting with persons who are deaf or hard of hearing?** Among other things, your communication with such an individual must be as effective as your communication with hearing people.

**How do you communicate?** Provide aids or services as necessary to ensure that the deaf or hard of hearing individual understands what you are saying and that you understand him or her. These can include:

- use of qualified sign language or oral interpreters

- for people who are hard of hearing, speaking loudly and clearly, and use of assistive listening devices (to amplify sound)
- use of gestures or visual aids to supplement oral communication
- an exchange of written notes
- or use of a computer or typewriter.

**What method of communication should you use?** The law requires you to give primary consideration to the individual's preference. Ask how the person wishes to communicate.

For example, some people who are deaf do not use sign language and may need to use a different aid or rely on lipreading. In one-on-one communication with an individual who lip reads, an officer should face the individual directly, and should ensure that the communication takes place in a well-lighted area.

Honor the individual's choice unless it would significantly interfere with your law enforcement responsibilities or you are confident that other means of communicating, that may be easier to provide, are just as effective. Remember that deaf or hard of hearing persons must be able to understand you as well as those who do not have hearing impairments.

DO NOT ask a family member or friend to interpret for a deaf individual unless it is urgent to communicate immediately and that is the only option. If the deaf person requests that arrangement and the other person agrees, however, you can proceed.

**How do you know when you are communicating clearly to an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing?** Ask the

person to summarize what you are saying. Test his or her understanding.

**If the person uses sign language, what kinds of communication require an interpreter?** Consider the length, importance, and complexity of the communication, as well as the context.

– In a simple encounter, such as checking a driver’s license or giving directions, a notepad and pencil or perhaps gestures will normally be sufficient.

– During interrogations and arrests, a sign language interpreter will often be necessary.

– If the legality of a conversation will be questioned in court, such as where *Miranda* warnings are issued, a sign language interpreter may be necessary. You should be careful about misunderstandings in the absence of a qualified interpreter. A nod of the head may be an attempt to appear cooperative in the midst of misunderstanding, rather than consent or a confession of wrongdoing.

– In general, if an individual who does not have a hearing disability would be subject to police action without interrogation, then an interpreter will not be required, unless one is necessary to explain the action being taken.

**Example:** An officer clocks a car on the highway driving 15 miles above the speed limit. The driver, who is deaf, is pulled over and issued a noncriminal citation. The individual is able to understand the reasons for the citation, because the officer exchanges notes and points to information on the citation. A sign language interpreter is not needed.

**Example:** An officer responds to an aggravated battery call and upon arriving at the scene observes a bleeding victim and an individual holding a weapon. Eyewitnesses observed the individual strike the victim. The individual with the weapon is deaf, but the officer has probable cause to make a felony arrest without an interrogation. An interpreter is not necessary to carry out the arrest.

**Example:** An officer responds to the scene of a domestic disturbance. The husband says the wife has been beating their children and he has been trying to restrain her. The wife, who is deaf, requests an interpreter. The officer begins by exchanging notes but the woman’s responses indicate a lack of comprehension and poor grammar. An interpreter is necessary to carry out any arrest. In this situation, it would be inappropriate to use a family member to assist with communication, even if it is offered.

**Do you have to take a sign language interpreter to a call about a violent crime in progress or a similar urgent situation involving a person who is deaf?** No. An officer's immediate priority is to stabilize the situation. If the person being arrested is deaf, the officer can make an arrest and call for an interpreter to be available later at the booking station.

Contact numbers for your local sign language interpreters:

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