



Statement on Accessible Communication for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People during COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about important public health officials from many countries making unprecedented decisions which have had significant impacts on people's lives. The International Federation of Hard of Hearing People (IFHOH), International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People (IFHOHYP), The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and its youth section, the World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS) welcome measures taken to ensure public safety. Facial coverings and social distancing are two common protection strategies that pose barriers for deaf and hard of hearing people.

In addition to linguistic input, deaf and hard of hearing people rely heavily on facial expressions, speechreading and other visual input to support our understanding of conversation partners. Most hard of hearing persons communicate by oral means whereas most deaf persons communicate using national sign languages; however, visual cues from the person communicating are important for both groups. Face-covering masks and not using visual means of communication alongside linguistic input greatly impedes communication. Cooperation between all parties in a conversation is necessary in order to ensure accessible communication for everyone.

Hard of hearing persons define accessibility as a practice that will ensure equal access for all hard of hearing persons in all forms of communication. Accessibility may be technological (e.g. assistive listening devices, hearing loops, speech-to-text services, or apps) or non-technological (e.g. pen and paper, clear view of speaker's face to allow speechreading). We believe that the current means of personal protections can be adapted to create an accessible environment which allows for clear communication with hard of hearing persons.

Full accessibility for deaf people is reached when all aurally transmitted information and communications are provided in national sign languages. The use of the national sign languages will ease the implementation of safe distancing measures as its use does not require any physical proximity. In addition to making public information available in national sign languages, information should be communicated via visual means as outlined throughout this statement.

We request government officials, private businesses, non-governmental organizations, cultural, educational, public and social service institutions consider the following recommendations in their responses to COVID-19:

- Mandate the use of clear, transparent face masks and shields for all workers who communicate frequently with the public (a working document on the Global Inventory of Clear & Transparent Face Masks/Shields can be found on the link [here](#)). A stock of transparent masks should be available in every hospital to be used when deaf and hard of hearing people come in, and deaf people must be given access to national sign language interpreters upon request in advance of a visit. Alternatively, some hard of hearing persons may instead require access to a captionist.
- Provide essential information in text format in public spaces, particularly in medical settings (e.g., a list of frequently asked questions at the reception). To ensure maximum access for all, this information should be supplemented with visual aids. It is also recommended that printed information contain a QR code to access this information in national sign languages, or via the provision of remote sign languages interpretation services.
- Use speech-to-text apps to facilitate communication for one-on-one conversations. Reduce background noise (e.g., music) at restaurants and shops so deaf and hard of hearing people can more accurately use automated speech apps to follow one-to-one conversation.
- Adopt a positive attitude towards communicating with deaf and hard of hearing people with visual language practices. These include using national sign languages, gesture-based communication, writing with pen and paper, using speech-to-text apps, and making sure the face is clear and visible.

It is worth noting that other members of our communities can benefit from these recommendations, such as those who are seniors, those with auditory processing challenges, those who communicate in different languages, and those who have other sensory needs. The use of clear face masks benefits everyone, as does providing visual information, because doing so reduces the overall potential for misunderstandings.

Accessibility is an integral part of the efforts that must be made to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Our organizations issue this joint statement for everyone to continue to promote accessible communication through the recommendations outlined above. Clear communication and clear language use require creativity and good will from everyone. Let us navigate these challenging times together!

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