

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/video-relay-system-to-interpret-for-deaf-crime-victims-in-dc>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

I was so excited to see [this article](#) in the *Washington Post* last week.

The article highlights a pilot program in the DC Police Department to install software for responding officers to communicate with Deaf and hard of hearing individuals using American Sign Language interpreters through a video relay system. I was impressed by the forward-thinking efforts to remove barriers to access communication for these often marginalized crime victims.

Through [Vera's Accessing Safety Initiative](#), we partner with such organizations as the [Justice for Deaf Victims National Coalition](#) to help victim service organizations and the criminal justice system better meet the needs of Deaf victims. While there is limited research on how often Deaf and hard of hearing individuals experience crime, anecdotal evidence and reports from Deaf victims suggest that these victims experience many barriers to accessing the help they need. Service providers and criminal justice system personnel often lack the training and resources, such as American Sign Language interpreters, necessary to effectively communicate with these survivors.

Without interpreters, for example, law enforcement officers usually end up relying on writing notes or lip reading ineffective ways to communicate, especially when a Deaf person is in crisis. Information is not communicated accurately, and written notes create concrete documentation of a victim's testimony that can be used by defense attorneys to highlight inconsistencies in the future. Another common mistake that law enforcement officers make is using family members to interpret, thus potentially compromising the victim's safety and confidentiality, as well as contaminating their testimony.

The DC pilot program will give law enforcement officers instant remote access to American Sign Language interpreters, therefore allowing Deaf and hard of hearing crime victims to communicate in their first language in a timely manner.

This is a critical first step toward eliminating communication barriers for Deaf and hard of hearing crime victims. I hope that other law enforcement communities will soon follow suit.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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