

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/with-liberty-justice-and-communication-access-for-all>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

By now, you are likely aware of the [fake sign language interpreter](#) at Nelson Mandelas memorial. Perhaps you have also seen the video of the [considerate 5-year-old girl](#) who signed her kindergarten holiday concert so her Deaf parents could follow along. Both stories have received heavy media coverage, appearing in newspapers, on television newscasts, and on social media feeds. These stories may, at first, seem markedly different from one another; one taking place at the memorial service for one of modern history's most important figures and the other at a small-town elementary school. One story elicits outrage while the other puts a smile on one's face. Yet these stories both demonstrate the need for communication access for the Deaf community. Whether a Deaf person is watching a public memorial service or attending a school function, shouldn't they have the same communication access as their hearing counterparts? Shouldn't a Deaf person who becomes a victim of a crime be able to communicate with law enforcement? Shouldn't Deaf victims be able to receive the same supports and services as other victims of crime?

Last month, [Veras Center on Victimization and Safety \(CVS\)](#) hosted a national training on serving Deaf crime victims, focusing heavily on communication access. While Deaf people experience domestic and sexual violence at rates similar to their hearing counterparts, they are less likely to get the help they need because our country's victim services and criminal justice system have yet to account for their unique cultural and linguistic needs. Unique barriers block their access to emergency hotlines, including 911 in some jurisdictions, as well as crisis intervention and advocacy services, forensic exams, crime victim compensation, shelter, and counseling services, among other supports.

CVS used this conference to highlight best practices in community- and criminal justice-based responses to crimes against Deaf people. The conference, held in Vancouver, Washington on November 5 and 6, featured more than 20 of our country's leading experts on domestic and sexual violence against Deaf individuals (many of whom are Deaf themselves) training on topics ranging from using technology safely to communicate with Deaf survivors to increasing access to the criminal justice system and legal services. More than 200 first responders, prosecutors, and victim service providers from around the country were in attendance.

Conference attendees were met with a unique conference experience; one shaped by Deaf culture and communication needs. Conference signs were bi-lingual, using English and American Sign Language (ASL) signs or alphabet. Lights flashed on and off to get the attention of attendees. The vast majority of presentations were given in ASL and voiced into English by a team of 12 ASL interpreters. Interpreters were available during registration, conference breaks, and evening activities to foster networking between Deaf and hearing colleagues a rarity due to communication barriers. In addition to exposing hearing attendees to Deaf culture, these conference features helped to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for Deaf attendees who made up 40 percent of attendees.

While our conference might not have garnered the same attention as recent news events, we hope that we were able to not only create a positive and informative training experience for both Deaf and hearing attendees, but a training experience where the most basic of human necessities—the ability to communicate with one another—was achieved.

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

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