

Accessible Customer Service for Emergency Responders

An Emergency Management Ontario E-Learning Utility

Tips for Interacting and Communicating with People who are Deaf, Deafened or Hard of Hearing

Communication

- Talk to the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing person, not about him or her.
- Make and maintain eye contact.
- Face the person and communicate with him or her, not the interpreter.
- Keep your face clear for speechreading. Eliminate obstacles in front of your face (for example a mask), avoid chewing gum, and be aware that moustaches and beards can hinder speechreading for some people.
- Your visual attention, facial expressions and physical contact are all very important in creating a bond between you and the deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person.
- Keep facial expressions consistent with your feelings, and emotions; this is what the deaf, deafened and hard of hearing person sees and interprets. If deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people sense inconsistencies, it will confuse the communication.
- Don't shout; speak clearly and distinctly, and at a moderate pace.
- Give clues when changing the conversation subject.
- Rephrase, rather than repeat, when you are not understood.
- Avoid side conversations; although reassuring to hearing people, side conversation may cause deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people to feel they are missing important information.
- If you have trouble understanding a person with a hearing loss, ask him or her to repeat what they have said.
- Patience and flexibility are important when establishing communication with a deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person.
- Sign language involves the whole body and may look aggressive to you – using the whole body to express degrees of emotion and special concepts is part of the language and should generally not be considered a sign of aggression.
- Write down key phrases and words.
- Take advantage of technical devices that improve communication, such as the Pocket Talker, or a BlackBerry or other handheld device.

- Use professional, qualified sign language interpreters, and avoid, if possible, using unqualified, untrained, well-intentioned 'signers' or friends/family to fill the role of interpreter.

Physical Contact

- Get the person's attention before you speak, by using visual attention-getting strategies when calling a deaf, deafened or hard of hearing person. For example, tap the person's shoulder to attract attention if his/her back is turned or wave in their peripheral vision if they are not looking in your direction.
- Avoid startling or frightening a person by doing anything unexpected from behind.
- When you restrict a person's hands who uses sign language, be aware that their ability to communicate has been restricted.

Environment/Surroundings

- The best spot to communicate is one that is quiet and well lit.
- The light source should be on your face, rather than behind you to make speechreading easier.
- Eliminate background noise (for example, sirens may interfere with communication).