



Family &
Community
Services

A NSW Government agency guide for
**effective communication for
people with a sensory disability**



Purpose and context

Communication is critical to a person's identity, interactions and safety. Access to information is enabling, empowering and essential to access, participate and unite a community. The NSW Government is committed to removing barriers that prevent people with disability from accessing the things that are available to most other people in the community.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities obliges signatories (including Australia) to communicate with people using the communication of their choice, including *'facilitating the use of sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions'*¹.

This paper provides advice for NSW Government agencies and services to promote better communication to people with sensory disability. People with sensory disability include those who:

- have visual impairment or are blind
- are Deaf or hard of hearing
- are deafblind.

This paper has been developed in the context of the below national and international policies, protocols, standards and legislative requirements. These reinforce the rights of people with disability, and commitments to enhance the participation and inclusion of people with disability in the community.

- *Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992*
- National Disability Strategy NSW Implementation plan
- National Disability Agreement
- Social Inclusion Principles for Australia
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol.

It is estimated that 1 in 6 Australians are affected by hearing loss. By 2050, this is forecast to grow to 1 in 4². Approximately 90% of people born with hearing impairment are born into hearing families. Hearing loss is mostly associated with ageing. It is estimated there are over 2,500 deafblind people, aged 18–65 in Australia (about 500 in NSW)³.

1 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol (2006). Article 21

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009, *Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers (SDAC)*, Australia

3 Access Economics. (2007). *Making sense, A report into dual sensory loss and multiple disabilities in Australia*, Sydney, Australia

The Deaf community is a linguistic minority, defined in Australia by their use of Auslan (Australian Sign Language). In 2011 there were over 2,500 sign language users in NSW and nearly 10,000 sign language users across Australia⁴. Deaf people value membership in the signing community, and participation in its organisational networks. Only a small percentage of the total number of people with a hearing loss identify with the Deaf community. This is because the majority of people with hearing loss acquire it later in life.

In 2009 it was reported that 575,000 Australians aged over 40 had vision loss and 70% of these people were over the age of 70⁵. It is also estimated that 70,000 Australians are blind.

People who are Deaf, hard of hearing or deafblind may have difficulty receiving radio, television, sirens, or other audible emergency information or warnings during an emergency situation initiated by government agencies. Similarly, individuals who are blind or who have low vision may not be aware of visual cues, such as flashing lights, emergency short message service alerts and scrolling emergency information on television. This is even more of an issue for people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind, blind or have low vision who live in rural and remote areas who may rely on family and friends to inform them of emergencies.

4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, (2011), *2011 Census Data: Table Builder Basic – Cultural and Language Diversity*, ABS, Canberra

5 Access Economics Pty Ltd (2010) *Clear focus – The Economic Impact of Vision Loss in Australia in 2009*. Vision 2020, Melbourne, Australia

Inclusive communication strategies

Communicating in a person's preferred language is always important but is essential when:

- there is an emergency or personal or community threat
- the person is required to make significant, informed decisions
- assessing, discussing or planning for the person's safety, wellbeing, health or employment.

The following communication approaches can be used to assist with effectively communicating with individuals with a sensory disability:

Accredited interpreters: An accredited interpreter service is appropriate whenever the person may be disadvantaged without it. This includes situations which require an understanding of complex information of a medical, technical or legal nature or emotional situations when a person's command of English is more limited.

The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) can be used to find and engage accredited interpreters. Interpreters accredited at 'Interpreter Level' (formerly Level 3) are usually the most appropriate for communication of a public or critical nature. 'Paraprofessional Level' (formerly Level 2) interpreters should not be used in critical interactions or public broadcasts.

It is important to check with the person who is Deaf or hard of hearing to ascertain if they prefer Auslan, signed English or fingerspelling. People who are deafblind may use hand over hand (Auslan), visual frame (Auslan) and/or tactile fingerspelling.

It is also important to note that there are some Deaf people who do not use Auslan fluently, such as those who arrived in Australia as refugees and/or those who use other international sign languages. The NAATI website has a directory that provides information on interpreting services in a wide range of languages including international sign languages.

Television captioning: Captioning (subtitles and text of what is being said on the television screen) is not accessible to all Deaf people, as literacy levels in the Deaf community are variable. For this reason, both captioning and Auslan interpreting are usually required for important broadcast announcements.

- **Closed captioning:** is available on all free to air television programs shown between 6pm-10.30pm, and on news and current affairs programs, on the primary channels of all free-to-air networks. Many programs are also captioned outside of prime time. Captions are 'closed' if a person has to use the menu options on a television to switch them on. Closed captions can be pre-recorded or sent live (e.g. emergency broadcasts). However, live captions

often have errors and can be an unreliable source of information in emergency situations. Media Access Australia has information on required levels of captioning on television. Captioned programs are usually indicated by 'CC' (closed captions) in television program guides. Closed captioning may not be available on devices in public locations, including emergency shelters.

- **Open captioning:** provides real-time captioning of what is said on screen. Open captions do not need to be switched on by the viewer as they appear automatically on the screen. It is essential in emergency broadcasting for all who cannot hear the broadcast, or those who may have English as a second language. Open captioning can also be provided in interactive communication, including community engagement and meetings, through captioning services that provide services to meetings, conferences and education settings.

Audio description and live audio description: are ways of describing visual information on a television screen, or conveying visual actions and expressions. For example, an audio description would say that 'a car is driving into a fire zone', or would verbally describe the items shown on a screen. Audio description is available in many public places including cinemas and theatres. Videos which include audio description, will assist people with vision impairments to receive the intended information. When developing these resources, it is best to use an organisation that specialises in the production of audio material for people with a visual impairment when developing videos.

Auslan video translation: Key information can be translated and filmed in Auslan by Auslan translation services, and made available on a website and/or through platforms such as YouTube. This enables Deaf people to access information clearly and comfortably in their first language and assists with community engagement.

Hearing loops: are an aid for the hard of hearing and hearing impaired. They are a loop of cable around a designated area, usually a room or a building, which generates a magnetic field picked up by a hearing aid. People use 'T switch' on their hearing aid or cochlea implant to use the hearing loop. Fixed hearing loops can be found in many places including conference rooms and reception desks. Portable hearing loops can travel with a person or be carried by designated personnel. Portable hearing loops can look like a small transmitter which can be placed on a table or held by a person.

Teletypewriter (TTY) and 106 TTY Emergency Service: A TTY is a device that lets people who are Deaf, hearing impaired, or speech-impaired, use the telephone to communicate by allowing them to type messages back and forth to one another instead of talking and listening. TTYs can interact with non-TTY through the National Relay Service. Most TTYs are not portable, and are reliant on electricity, and thus may not be usable in an emergency. The 106 TTY Emergency Service provides access for TTY users to fire, police and ambulance services and

is available 24 hours a day. A person, who relies on a TTY to make calls, can dial 106 in an emergency if they are in a location where they have access to a TTY. A 106 call has priority over other TTY calls. The use of TTYs is declining due to developments in internet and mobile device technologies. However, a number of Deaf and hard of hearing people still use TTYs.

National Relay Service (NRS): The NRS is available to people who are Deaf or hard of hearing, and those people who have speech impairment. The service facilitates telephone conversation between a person with a TTY or computer modem and a person using an ordinary telephone. The NRS has expanded its services to also include SMS relay, Video Relay Service in Auslan, captioned relay and internet relay (e.g. Skype). All NRS call numbers can be found at: <http://relayservice.gov.au/support/training/nrs-call-numbers/>

Easy English: Auslan does not have a widely-used written form and English is a second language for many Deaf people. 'Easy English' refers to short written sentences that simplifies complicated ideas and includes pictures or images that support the message. It is advised to test Easy English communications with consumers.

Communication aids and equipment:

- **Infra red system:** sound can be transmitted as infra red light waves. A transmitter is attached to the sound source and a receiver worn to pick up the sound.
- **FM system:** sound is transmitted as FM radio waves from a speaker, using a transmitter, to the listener wearing a receiver. This system is used in classrooms and for lecture tours.
- **Flashing lights:** these can be attached to a door bell, telephone, alarm clock or baby cry alarm.
- **Vibrating alarms and discs:** these are placed under the pillow and vibrate rather than give out an audible sound. NSW has a Smoke Alarm Subsidy Scheme that provides financial support to purchase specialised smoke alarms which employ flashing lights and vibrating under-pillow pads to supplement the standard sound of an alarm. For information about the scheme go to www.deafsociety.org.au or contact the Deaf Society of NSW on 02 8833 3600, TTY: 02 8833 3691 or email info@deafsociety.com

Braille: is a reading and writing method used by a small proportion of Australians who are blind or vision impaired. Documents on computer file can be converted into Braille using Braille conversion software and printed out by a Braille embosser.

Large print text: Large print documents can be produced on a computer, with text in a variety of font sizes to meet individual requirements. There are Australian standards for large print text that offers recommendations for type of font, font size, formatting and printing options.

For information on Australian large print text standards:

<http://printdisability.org/>

<http://www.visionaustralia.org/business-and-professionals>

Tactile indicators: can assist a person with vision impairment to physically navigate their environment. These include tactile ground surface indicators which are raised dots and lines along pathways indicating direction, start, stop and change. Braille and raised tactile indicators can be used in buildings, such as numbers on lifts and toilet doors.

Electronic and computer technology: Online accessibility includes websites, intranets, applications, mobile apps and documents. Information on web accessibility and requirements for NSW Government agencies can be found at: http://www.advertising.nsw.gov.au/web_accessibility_resources

PDF files are not considered to be accessible and as such, an alternative document format should always be provided, such as Microsoft Word or Rich Text Format (RTF).

Electronic documents should be made accessible by providing a clear document structure, making use of document styles such as headings, using meaningful alternative text for images, and providing enough colour contrast between text and background. Avoid the use of complicated tables or diagrams such as flowcharts unless necessary to convey information. When such elements are included, a text summary should also be included.

Staff training and professional development: Government departments and agencies that have an interface with the community are encouraged to provide communications staff with disability awareness training. Specific [Deaf Awareness Training](#) and specific blind and vision impairment training is ideal as the needs of people who are Deaf, hard of hearing, blind or vision impaired are significantly different to those of other disability groups.

NSW Government departments and agencies have internal corporate communications units that produce relevant agency specific business rules, standards, policies and protocols in relation to communication strategies and approaches. Further consultation with your agency's corporate communication unit is recommended to ensure your agency incorporates inclusive communication strategies.

Resources and links

Key Sensory Disability Organisations

Deaf Australia Inc.

<http://www.deafau.org.au>

Deaf Society NSW

<http://deafsocietynsw.org.au>

http://deafsocietynsw.org.au/information/emergency_information

http://deafsocietynsw.org.au/news/entry/resilience_natural_hazards

Deafblind Association NSW

<http://www.dbansw.org.au>

Deafness Forum of Australia

<http://www.deafnessforum.org.au>

Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children

<http://www.ridbc.org.au>

Vision Australia

<http://www.visionaustralia.org.au>

<http://www.visionaustralia.org/business-and-professionals>

Translation and Interpreting Resources

Australian Communications and Media Authority

<http://www.acma.gov.au>

Australian Communications Consumer Action Network

<http://accan.org.au>

Australian Communication Exchange

<http://www.aceinfo.net.au>

National Accreditation Authority for Translator and Interpreters for accredited Interpreters in each state

<http://www.naati.com.au>

National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf (NAATD)

<http://naatd.org.au>

National Relay Service

<http://www.relayservice.com.au>

<http://relayservice.gov.au/support/training/nrs-call-numbers>

Telstra Disability Services

<http://www.telstra.com.au/aboutus/community-environment/community-programs/disability>

<http://www.telstra.com.au/payphoneservices/tty.htm>

Accessibility Resources

Accessibility

<http://www.accessibility.com.au>

Adobe Accessibility Support

<http://www.adobe.com/accessibility.html>

Ageing, Disability and Home Care

<http://www.adhc.nsw.gov.au/accessibility>

Microsoft Office Accessibility Support

<http://office.microsoft.com/en-au/support/overview-creating-accessible-office-files-HA102671874.aspx>

Providing Access for People who are Blind or Vision Impaired

<http://www.guidedogs.com.au/education-and-resources/access/dont-turn-a-blind-eye>

The Round Table on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities

<http://printdisability.org/>

Vision Australia Digital Access Resources

<http://www.visionaustralia.org/business-and-professionals/digital-access>

Communication Guidelines and Good Practice

Australian Department of Communications

http://www.internetbasics.gov.au/getting_started_on_the_internet/assistive_technology

Australian Emergency Management Institute

<http://www.em.gov.au/Emergencymanagement/Preparingforemergencies/Plansandarrangements/Pages/AustralianGovernmentEmergencyManagementPlans.aspx>

<http://www.em.gov.au/Publications/Australianemergencymanualseries/PagesCommunicatingwithPeoplewithDisabilityNationalGuidelinesforEmergencyManagers.aspx>

Australian Web Guide

<http://webguide.gov.au/accessibility-usability/>

Strategic Communications, NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet

<http://www.advertising.nsw.gov.au/strategic-communications/website-toolkit/introduction>

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2

www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20

Background Legislation, Plans and Policy

Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/>

<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/standards/world-wide-web-access-disability-discrimination-act-advisory>

Australian Web Accessibility- National Transition Strategy

<http://www.finance.gov.au/publications/wcag-2-implementation/index.html>

Disability Discrimination Act 1992

http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/consol_act/dda1992264/

National Principles for Disaster Recovery

<http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/communities-and-vulnerable-people/publications-articles/national-principles-for-disaster-recovery>

National Strategy for Disaster Resilience

<http://www.coag.gov.au/node/81>

National Disability Strategy

<http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy>

National Disability Strategy- NSW Implementation Plan 2012–2014

http://www.adhc.nsw.gov.au/about_us/strategies/national_disability_strategy

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol

<http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>