

By Denise Johnson, Project Coordinator for AODA Services for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing

“Why Can’t I Get An Interpreter”

This story is not unique for people who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and require an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter in situations where they are in need of an interpreter for an emergency or crisis with police, hospital, mental health or alcohol and drug abuse (AODA) counseling/treatment provider. In this situation, a Deaf woman waited more than 3-1/2 hours to receive an interpreter at the emergency room (ER) at her local hospital. The Deaf woman was under a lot of stress and was not receiving any communication upon her arrival. Because she worried about “will I get an ASL interpreter?”, the Deaf woman was so nervous and worried, it only intensified her health situation and stress. The hospital tried to avoid hiring an interpreter and instead, they sought to bring in one of their employees to interpret for the woman. The employee (a nurse) was not qualified to interpret, he was signing very, very slow and struggled to sign “what is your name?”... and he couldn’t even voice for her when the Deaf woman was signing back to him.

The Deaf woman finally got an interpreter but then the nurse or doctor did not show up and they had to wait another 40 minutes. Finally, the doctor and the nurse came in the room, spoke few minutes, and then left out of the room. The Deaf woman thought she waited 3-1/2 hours only to be seen by the doctor for few minutes. If she did not need interpreter, she would have long been home or got proper services 4 hours ago.

Deaf/Hard of Hearing/Deaf-Blind communication is not one size for all:

Individuals who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing or Deaf-Blind have a wide range of ability to function, communicate and to speak and hear. Many barriers exist in the community, making it difficult for these populations to participate fully in community life.

If these barriers were overcome, how were they overcome and what helped you get access to services?

Every service provider/organization/place of business should obtain proper and in-depth education to be prepared and improve their services when working with persons who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing or Deaf-Blind.