

In the United States, the rights of those with disabilities, including those who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, have been enshrined in federal law for decades. The rights of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing include access to effective communication while receiving treatment and care in hospitals, inpatient and outpatient clinics, and long-term care facilities. Access to effective communication for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing is key to ensure that they are able to fully participate in their medical care by being able to convey information back and forth with their health care provider and to be fully informed and understand their care. However, when Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals do not have access to effective communication, they are at increased risk of poor health outcomes, dissatisfaction with their care, increased health care utilization, and higher health care costs. In order to provide and facilitate effective communication for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, health care providers can use accommodations such as sign language interpretation and personal amplification devices.

Individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing face barriers to receiving communication accommodations in health care settings. These barriers include providers not wanting to absorb the cost of the accommodation and failure to understand federal law or use of effective communication accommodations. To increase access to effective communication in health care settings for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, the North Carolina Institute of Medicine, in partnership with the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, convened a seven-month Task Force on Access to Health Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in the spring of 2019. The task force was brought together to study the barriers and limitations to effective communication for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in health care settings and to identify consensus-based recommendations to increase access to effective communication.

The recommendations of the North Carolina Institute of Medicine Task Force on Access to Health Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing call on health care providers, state agencies, advocacy organizations, professional associations, and health care payers to collaborate in educational, self-assessment, and evaluation efforts across health care settings to increase access to effective communication for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in North Carolina.

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