

Emergency Response for Individuals with Sensory Loss **Knowledge and Guidance**



Alabama Institute
for Deaf and Blind

Deaf. Blind. Limitless.

ALABAMA
PUBLIC
HEALTH

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Introduction

The Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), along with the Alabama Department of Public Health (ADPH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) want to protect the health and safety of individuals with a sensory loss. Common sensory issues include hearing loss or deafness, low vision or blindness, and DeafBlindness.

AIDB specializes in helping individuals in these communities. Since its founding in 1858, AIDB has had a long history of providing comprehensive education, rehabilitation, and service programs to individuals of all ages who are deaf, blind, DeafBlind, and multi-disabled and their families. This includes educating other agencies and groups who serve these communities.

This document will serve as a resource for first responders, emergency personnel, community based organizations, and community members. It contains information on a variety of sensory issues,

as well as how to assist people with a sensory loss during a time of crisis. It also contains information related to individuals with autism spectrum disorder and mobility impairments.

This document was written in collaboration and with input from educators, social workers, advocates, and individuals with a sensory loss.

Purpose

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a lack of knowledge and understanding when aiding individuals with a sensory loss in a community. Opportunities for improvement include emergency response and preplanning to assure that the needs of vulnerable populations are considered. This guide was created with the aim of better preparing first responders, healthcare workers, and community agencies with general knowledge and communication skills when interacting with individuals with sensory loss.



Deaf and Hard of Hearing

There are many ranges in which a person's ability to hear may be affected and individual abilities and needs vary. Any degree of hearing loss, from mild to profound, includes those who are hard of hearing and those who are Deaf. Individuals who are hard of hearing or Deaf are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) laws. Be knowledgeable of their rights.

The following terms are considered offensive and should never be used when referring to someone with hearing loss:

- Deaf-mute
- Deaf and dumb
- Hearing impaired
- Disabled
- Handicapped

More acceptable words to use would be:

- Deaf
- Hard of hearing
- Hearing loss

Hard of Hearing

Hard of hearing refers to a person with hearing loss ranging from mild to severe. People who are hard of hearing usually communicate through spoken language as with people who are Deaf, they can benefit from hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other assistive devices as well as closed captioning. A cochlear implant uses a sound processor that is behind the ear and a transmitter is placed under the skin. These

devices can help to provide a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly Deaf or severely hard of hearing.

Deafness

Deafness usually refers to hearing loss so severe that there is very little or no functional hearing. The hearing loss is greater than ninety decibels. It is so severe that a person cannot process linguistic information through hearing with or without amplification.

Common Characteristics of Deafness

- Exaggerated body language. The person may be very expressive with facial and body movements.
- Louder than normal speech or vocal sounds/noises.
- Nonverbal or unclear speech. A person may have the ability to speak, but the speech may sound distorted.
- Verbal commands or questions may be confusing. They may answer a question incorrectly due to misunderstanding what was asked. At times, the person could become agitated due to the inability to communicate.
- The individual may not react to sounds i.e., alarms, sirens, and speech.
- Notice signage or clues with an individual. This could include a sticker on their vehicle, a medical alert necklace or bracelet, a tag on their personal belongings, an alert card, or a yard sign.



- Recognize if the person is using ASL (American Sign Language) or another form of nonverbal communication.

If You Suspect a Sensory Loss (Hearing)

- Let the person know, in some way, you understand and are aware of their sensory loss. This may be through texting, writing, fingerspelling, gestures, or ASL. Although a person is hard of hearing or Deaf, they may be able to read lips. Face the individual when speaking or communicating.
- Communicate all necessary information to the best of your ability until an interpreter or interpreting service becomes available. This should be arranged as soon as possible.
- Work with everyone involved to ensure effective communication is established and maintained.
- It is legally required for an interpreter or interpreting devices to be provided for someone with a hearing loss. It is the responsibility of the agency to provide, schedule, and secure the necessary services.
- Do not restrain an individual's arms or hands unless it is necessary. This strips them of their main form of communication.

Communication

Tips for communicating with an individual who is Deaf or hard of hearing include:

- Get their attention (tap gently on their shoulder or wave your hand).
- Face the person.
- Establish eye contact with the person.

- Speak directly to the person at a moderate pace while signing.
- Sign the manual alphabet to fingerspell names and other keywords for which there are no signs available.
- When fingerspelling a word, place your arm near the chest, your wrist is steady, your hand is facing the person, and only move your fingers.
- Use natural facial expressions, gestures, and pantomime.
- Make sure your mouth can be seen.
- If possible, make sure to have good lighting.
- Use normal lip movement and volume.
- Do not exaggerate each word or mumble. This can make it difficult to lip-read.
- Point to parts of your body if necessary.
- If an interpreter is available, do not look at the interpreter when speaking to an individual who is Deaf.
- Someone who is Deaf, hard of hearing, or DeafBlind can text 999 or call 911 using their preferred form of phone communication (including voice, TTY, video relay, caption relay, or real-time text).
- Many people with hearing loss have an alert device for an emergency. An alert device can include a smoke alarm signaler, a doorbell signaler, a telephone signaler, a baby crying signaler, or a carbon monoxide signaler.
- When all else fails, write it down or draw a picture.
- Most importantly, remain calm and be patient.



Blind and Low Vision

There are different degrees of vision and each individual's needs and abilities are different. Low vision describes a loss of visual acuity while retaining some vision. It can be in one or both eyes. Their vision may be blurry, have difficulty making out details, or have a hard time following a moving object. Legally blind means a person has a corrected vision of 20/200 in their best eye. If visual aids, such as glasses, can correct a person's vision to 20/20, they are not considered legally blind. Total blindness refers to someone with complete loss of sight. The person may have light perception. They have less than 1/10 of normal vision or no vision at all.

Individuals with limited vision and who are active in the community can usually be identified by the mode of assistance needed for them to be independent. This could be with either a white-tipped cane or a guide dog.

Individuals who are blind or have low vision are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The following terms are considered to be offensive and should never be used when referring to someone with vision loss:

- Handicapped
- Blind man/woman
- Having a "disorder"
- Being "special"

More acceptable words to use would be:

- A man/ woman/ individual who is blind or has vision loss
- Visually impaired

Common Characteristics of Blindness and Low Vision

- Unresponsive to motions and visual stimuli: Some individuals may not have any sight; therefore, they will not respond to stimuli. Someone with low vision possibly can respond to stimuli.
- Depending on the eye condition, the eyes may appear cloudy and discolored.
- Irregular eye movement or reflexes.
- Individuals may blink, squint, close their eyes, or rub their eyes unconsciously. Some individuals may seem to be staring "into space" or looking through or past others.
- Inability to recognize people, objects, signage, etc.
- The person may move cautiously in an unfamiliar environment.
- The individual may reach slowly to locate objects.
- Some individuals may have difficulty maintaining eye contact or unable to do so even though it may look as if they are.
- It may be hard to identify others by visual means. They can readily identify someone they know by the sound of their voice.



- Identifying objects, while using their vision, may be a challenge. Objects may be identified by touch.
- Most individuals will identify themselves as having some type of vision loss.

If You Suspect a Sensory Loss (Vision)

- Greet the person, as you walk toward them, by stating your name and your role in the community. Speak directly to him/her in a normal tone of voice.
- Do not assume they need assistance. If they do, offer your arm, bent at a 90-degree angle. They will place their hand above your elbow. Walk at a normal pace.
- Do not grab, touch, push, or pull the person.
- Explain the surroundings, in as much detail as possible. Navigate the person to the stairs by placing their hand on the railing. Keep in mind, verbal cues are their main mode of communication and sighted guides help in navigating their surroundings.
- Personal objects should be arranged and organized so they can be easily located.
- When giving directions, be specific; right, left, straight, carpet or tile flooring, doors, stairs, etc.
- When walking as a sighted guide, do not walk on the same side the person is holding their cane. This keeps them from trailing the boundaries.
- After ending a conversation with an individual that has low vision or is blind, make them aware that you are leaving.



DeafBlind

DeafBlind is a sensory loss in both hearing and vision. It encompasses a spectrum of mild to severe hearing and vision loss. Most people who are DeafBlind have some vision and some hearing. A small percentage (<1%) of the population is totally deaf and blind. These individuals have the ability to think and make decisions for themselves, as long as an effort is put into communicating with them.

Individuals who are DeafBlind are protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) laws. Be knowledgeable of their rights.

Common Characteristics of DeafBlindness

- Unresponsive to motion and visual stimuli. Some people may not have any sight, while others may have peripheral or central vision loss.
- Unresponsive to sounds. An individual may not react to any sound or only to certain sounds with a high pitch. They may be unable to distinguish where a sound is coming from.
- Inability to recognize people, objects, or their surroundings. This can cause confusion and anxiety for the person.
- Unresponsive to verbal commands or questions. It may seem as if they are ignoring the speaker.
- They may answer a question incorrectly due to a lack of understanding of the speaker.
- Irregular eye movements are often noticed. Nystagmus, an involuntary movement of the eye from side to side, is very common.
- The individual may blink quickly, squint, close their eyes, stare at nothing, or rub their eyes subconsciously.
- An individual may be nonverbal, have slurred but understandable speech, have non-typical mouth movements, or have unclear speech.
- An individual who is DeafBlind may enter someone's personal space, stand extremely close to people or objects, and hold an item close to their face to see, or face the opposite direction when someone is speaking.
- An individual who is DeafBlind may use a higher volume to speak if they are able to talk. They may make loud noises and be unaware of the volume of their voice.
- An individual could be wearing a hearing aid, or a cochlear implant, traveling with a white-tipped cane, wearing bioptics, wearing dark sunglasses, having a pocket braille writer, or using a magnifier.
- A guide dog or sighted guide person may accompany them.
- The same common characteristics of deafness also apply to a person who is DeafBlind.



If You Suspect a Sensory Loss (Vision and Hearing)

- Approach a person who is DeafBlind with a gentle touch to the arm or shoulder.
- Identify yourself by name and role in the community. This will be signed into the palm of their hand.
- Allow them to feel your badge, handcuffs, medical bag, helmet, etc. This will help when identifying a first responder.
- If you think the person is DeafBlind, do not leave them in an open area; instead, direct them to the side of the room or area, a chair, or some type of landmark where they will be safe.
- Communicate all “emergent and necessary” information with the individual in the most efficient way until an interpreter is available.
- Listen to their concerns and respond accordingly. Most individuals know their strengths and limitations and can communicate them to you.



Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, communication, speech, and nonverbal communication. While autism is considered a lifelong disorder, the degree of functioning varies between individuals.

Individuals with ASD and other cognitive impairments are protected by ADA laws.

Common Characteristics of Autism

- Someone with autism may find it hard to use expressive communication. Many are nonverbal.
- Some may appear blunt, rude, or not interested in others without intentionally doing so.
- They may prefer to be alone rather than socialize with others. It is hard for them to make friends or be in a loud environment.
- Irregular speech patterns include repetition of words or phrases, copying the phrasing of others, and monotone speech. The conversation may be monopolized by their own interests and thoughts.
- Irregular body language includes fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, avoiding physical contact, lack of facial expression, inappropriate physical contact (grabbing, touching, licking, holding), and bizarre emotional responsiveness to stimuli.
- Someone with autism may have a fixation on a specific object or topic. They can become agitated and confused when interrupted, daydream, and have limited motivation.
- There are many noticeable physical actions with an autistic individual. These include swaying, rocking, tapping, hand flapping, finger movement, repetitive movements, kicking, and fidgeting. Self-abusive behaviors are often present such as biting, hitting, scratching, head banging, pinching, hair pulling, etc.

If You Suspect Someone Has Autism

- Some people with autism do not have a normal range of sensations. They may not feel the cold, heat, or pain in a typical manner. They may fail to acknowledge pain despite it being obvious. They may show an unusual pain response that could include laughter, humming, singing, and removing items of clothing.
- People with autism often have tactile/ touch sensory issues. Band-Aids or other adhesive products could increase their anxiety or aggression.
- Move slowly when interacting with the individual. Explain what you plan to do in advance. Walk through each step, where they may be going and who will be there. This may avert unnecessary outbursts or aggression. Remain calm to not create additional anxiety for them.
- When interacting with the individual, try to do so in a quiet area if possible. This will depend on the severity of the injury and the safety of the scene. Demonstrating what the interaction will consist of on another person first may help the person with autism have a better understanding and visual knowledge.
- Be patient.



Mobility Impairments

Mobility impairments include any condition that affects movement. It can affect any range of movement with both gross and/or fine motor skills. Individuals with mobility impairments are protected by ADA laws. Be aware of their rights.

Common Characteristics of Individuals with Mobility Impairments

- Irregular movements that may seem clumsy or unsteady.
- Movements may seem slow and misjudged, such as miss-reaching for items, dropping objects, miss-stepping, etc.
- Difficulty performing physical tasks: trouble sitting down, standing up, navigating terrain, bending over, picking up objects, etc.
- Quickened fatigue and weakness, tiredness from mild tasks, and spasms.
- Irregular gait and balance.
- Difficulty with moving themselves from

one place to another.

- Range of motion limitation.
- Requires assistance with ambulation.
- Use of mobility aids such as walkers, canes, wheelchairs, leg braces, prosthetics, etc.

If You Suspect someone has a Mobility Impairment

- Be patient. These types of impairments can cause individuals to take longer to perform tasks or comply with instructions.
- Pace activity; allow adequate time and rest periods to conserve energy.
- Provide frequent encouragement, along with prompting and assistance as needed.
- Utilize appropriate modalities, devices, or techniques to facilitate mobility. Do not take away or remove their mobility aids. This could result in injuries and strip the individual of their independence.

Resources and Contact Information

- AIDB is one resource available to assist when finding interpreting options. There are ten regional centers throughout the state. The centers also provide assistance for Alabamians who are Deaf, blind, DeafBlind, or multidisabled. Listed below are the regional centers. aidb.org

Birmingham Regional Center

220 34th Street South
Birmingham, Al 35222
(205) 328-3989

Decatur Regional Center

4104 U.S. Highway 31 South
Decatur, Al 35602
(205) 761-3850

Dothan Regional Center

111 Medical Drive
Dothan, Al 36303
(334) 677-6270

Huntsville Regional Center

4092 Memorial Parkway SW Suite 105
Huntsville, Al 35802
(256) 539-7881

Mobile Regional Center

1050 Government Street
Mobile, Al 36604
(251) 432-7777

Montgomery Regional Center

432 East Jefferson Street
Montgomery, Al 36104
(334) 262-0824

Opelika Regional Center

355 Dunlop Drive
Opelika, Al 36801
(334) 759-6960

Shoals Regional Center

512 North Main Street
Tuscumbia, Al 35674
(256) 383-3503

Talladega Regional Center

1209 Fort Lashley Avenue
Talladega, Al 35160
(256) 761-3370

Tuscaloosa Regional Center

2412 Skyland Blvd. East
Tuscaloosa, Al 35405
(205) 345-4883

- **The National Association of the Deaf (NAD)** website provides emergency management tools and resources to provide access to emergency services for Deaf and hard of hearing residents. nad.org
- **Dr. Bill Vicars (Dr. Bill)** offers numerous online videos focusing on fingerspelling, lessons, and practical skills. lifeprint.com
- A beneficial way for first responders to learn ASL. deafonline.org
- **The Interaction Advisory Group (IAG)** is an Alabama-based organization that offers training to emergency personnel and first responders. Their training is specific and knowledgeable due to firsthand experience. interactionadvisorygroup.com
- **The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** ensures people with a disability have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. ada.gov
- **Alabama Toll Free ADA Hotline** provides information about all aspects of the ADA, including employment, public entities, private business, telecommunications, transportation, and miscellaneous provisions. 1-800-205-9986 (voice) 1-888-574-2257 (TTY)
- **Autism Speaks** is an excellent resource that provides understanding and acceptance to people with autism. autismspeaks.org
- **The Regional Autism Network (RAN)** serves those who have questions, concerns, or resource needs regarding themselves, a family member, friend, client, patient, or student diagnosed or suspected Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). mh.alabama.gov/aiacc/regional-autism-network

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Manual Alphabet and Numbers



A



B



C



D



E



F



G



H



I



J



K



L



M



N



O



P



Q



R



S



T



U



V



W



X



Y



Z



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



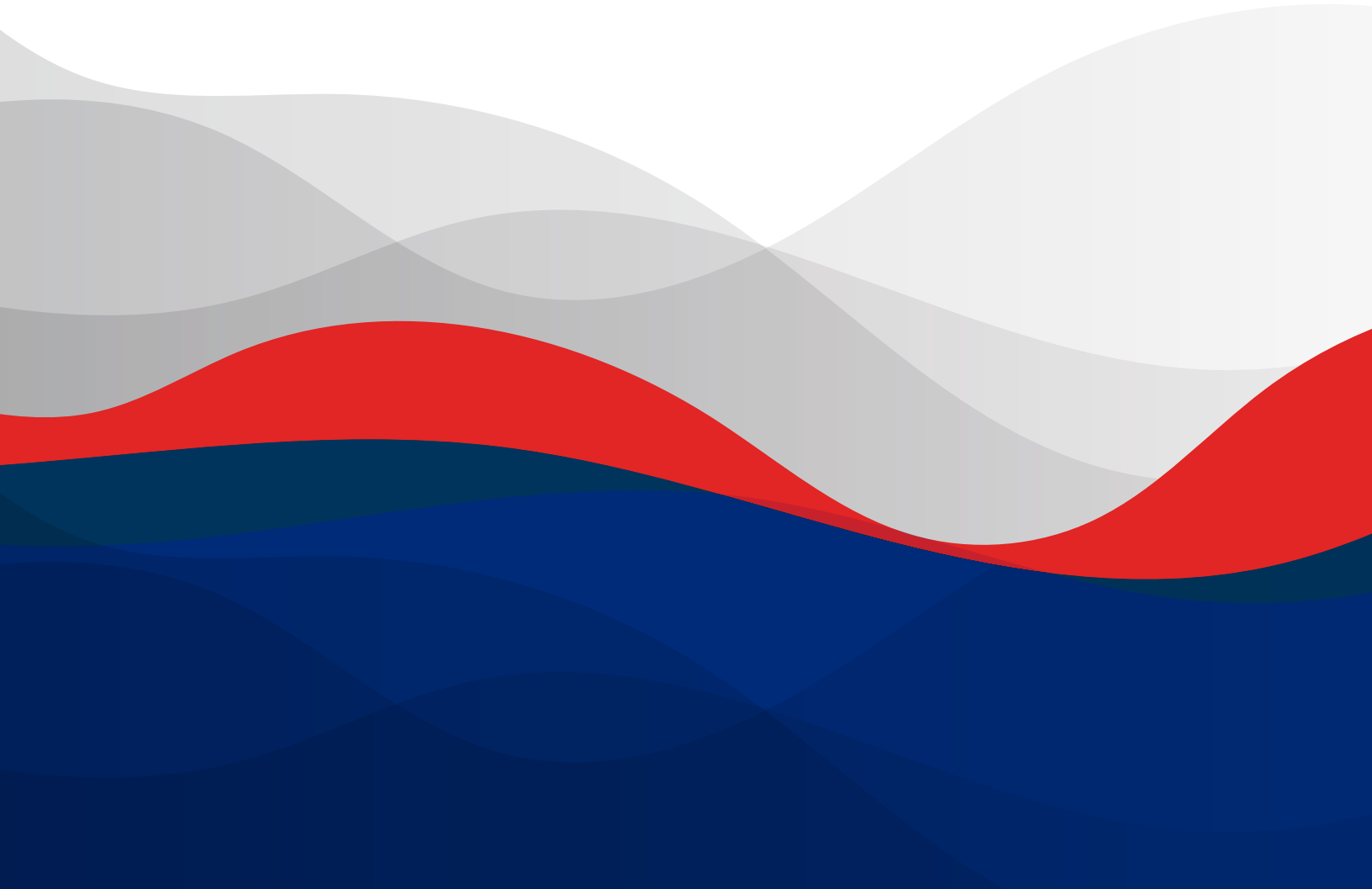
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This project was supported by a federal grant (Federal Award # 6NH75oT000104-01-01 and FAIN #NH75OT000104) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention(CDC) to ADPH under the National Initiative to Address COVID-19 Health Disparities Among Populations at High-Risk and Underserved, Including Racial and Ethnic Minority Populations and Rural Communities.