


**A First Responders Guide  
to Emergency American Sign  
Language (ASL)**



Produced by the Alabama Department of Public Health  
Health Media and Communications Division

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**AIDB  
Deaf, Blind, and Limitless  
and  
Alabama Department of Public Health**

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**Presenters**

**Susan McCrary and Wanda Scales  
AIDB  
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The Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind along with the Alabama Department of Public Health and The Center for Disease Control are passionate and understanding about the health and safety of individuals with a sensory impairment or loss. AIDB specializes in helping individuals in these communities. This includes educating agencies and groups who serve these communities during difficult times.

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### Common Sensory Impairments

- Deafness or hearing loss
- Blindness or low vision
- Deaf-Blindness
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Sensory Processing Disorder

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This document will serve as a resource for first responders, community agencies, and others in the community. It contains information on a variety of sensory impairments. This document will also provide tips on how to assist people with a sensory loss, autism spectrum disorder, and mobility impairments during times of crisis.

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### This Document Was Written in Collaboration With:

- Educators
- Social workers
- Advocates
- Individuals with sensory loss

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### Purpose

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a lack of knowledge and understanding when aiding individuals with a sensory loss in the community. Opportunities for improvement include emergency response and preplanning to assure that the needs of certain 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 impairments.

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### Hearing Loss

There are many ranges in which a person's ability to hear may be affected. Individual abilities and needs vary. Any degree of hearing loss, from mild to profound, include 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.

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**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

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**More acceptable words to use would be:**

- Deaf
- Hard of Hearing
- Hearing Loss

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**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. Individuals 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.

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### 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.

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### Common Characteristics of Deafness

- Exaggerated body language. The person may be very expressive with facial and body movements.
- Louder than what is considered normal speech or vocal sounds/noises.
- Nonverbal or unclear speech. A person may have the ability to speak, but speech may be distorted.
- Verbal commands or questions may be confusing. They may answer a question incorrectly due to misunderstanding the question that was asked. At times, the person may become agitated due to lack of communication.

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### Common Characteristics of Deafness

- An individual may not react to sounds (i.e. alarms, sirens, speech)
- Notice signage or clues that an individual might have hearing loss. 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 a person is using American sign Language (ASL) or other nonverbal forms of communication.

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### IF YOU SUSPECT A SENSORY HEARING LOSS

- Let the person know you understand and are aware of their sensory loss. This may be through texting, writing, fingerspelling, gestures, and/or ASL. A hard of hearing person may be able to hear some spoken language or lip read.
- Communicate all necessary information as best you can until an interpreter or an interpreting service is available. This should be arranged as soon as possible.

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### IF YOU SUSPECT A SENSORY HEARING LOSS

- Work with everyone involved to ensure effective communication is established or maintained.
- It is legally required for an interpreter or interpreting devices to be provided for someone with hearing loss. It is the responsibility of the agency to provide, schedule and secure the necessary services.
- If possible do not restrain an individual's arms or hands unless it is necessary. This strips them of their main form of communication.

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### Communication

#### TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH A DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING INDIVIDUAL

- Get their attention (tap gently on their shoulder or wave your hands)
- Face the person directly and establish eye contact
- Speak directly to the person at a moderate pace while signing or speaking.
- Manually sign, fingerspell, or write names or other key words when no signs are available.
- When fingerspelling a word, place your arm near the chest, wrist is steady, hand is facing the person, and only move your fingers.

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### Communication

#### TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH A DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING INDIVIDUAL

- Use natural facial expressions, gestures, and pantomime
- Make sure your mouth can be seen. If possible, have good lighting.
- Use normal lip movement and speech volume.
- Do not exaggerate each word or mumble. This can make it difficult to lip read.
- When all else fails, write it down or draw a picture.
- Point to people, objects, or things, if necessary.

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### Communication

- Point to parts of your body if necessary to communicate.
- If an interpreter is available, do not look at the interpreter when speaking to an individual who is deaf. Look at the individual.
- 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.
- Most importantly, remain calm and be patient.

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### Blindness and Low Vision

There are different degrees of vision loss. Each individual's needs and abilities are different. Low vision describes a loss of visual acuity while retaining some vision. Vision loss can be in one or both eyes. Their vision may be blurry, they may have difficulty making out details, or they might have a hard time following moving objects. To be 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, but they have less than 1/10 of normal vision or no vision at all.

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### Blindness and Low Vision

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 guide dog.

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

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### Common Characteristics of Blindness and Low Vision

- Individuals may be 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.

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### Common Characteristics of Blindness and Low Vision

- The person may move cautiously in an unfamiliar environment.
- The individual may reach slowly to locate objects.
- Some may have difficulty maintaining eye contact or be 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.

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### If You Suspect a Sensory Vision Loss

- Greet the person. As you walk toward them, state 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, Tactile Sign Language is their main mode of communication.

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### If You Suspect a Sensory Vision Loss

- 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.
- The use of negative words can create incorrect perceptions of people with sensory loss. Negative attitudes are often the most difficult barriers to overcome. Words such as "handicapped," "blind man/woman," having a "disorder," or being "special" can often put up a wall between the individual and someone trying to help.

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### Deaf-Blind

Deaf-Blind 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 deaf-blind have some hearing and/or vision. 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.

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**Common Characteristics of Deaf-Blindness**

- Some individuals may be unresponsive to motion and visual stimuli. Some individuals may not have any sight, while others may have limited vision.
- Some individuals may be unresponsive to sounds. An individual may not react to any sound or only certain loud sounds or sounds with a high pitch. They may be unable to distinguish where a sound is coming from.
- Some individuals may not recognize people, objects or their surroundings. This can cause confusion or anxiety.

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**Common Characteristics of Deaf-Blindness**

- Some individuals may be unresponsive to verbal commands, directions, and/or questions. It may seem as though they are ignoring the speaker.
- Questions may be answered incorrectly due to lack of communication or misunderstanding the speaker.
- Irregular eye movements may be noticed. Nystagmus is an involuntary movement of the eye from side to side, is very common.

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**Common Characteristics of Deaf-Blindness**

- The individual may blink quickly, squint, close their eyes, stare at nothing or rub their eyes subconsciously.
- They may answer questions incorrectly due to lack of understanding of the speaker.
- Irregular eye movements are often noticed.
- An individual may be non-verbal, have slurred but understandable speech, non-typical mouth movements, or have unclear speech.

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### Common Characteristics of Deaf-Blindness

- An individual who is deafblind may enter a person’s personal space, stand extremely close to people or objects, and hold items close to their face to see.
- An individual who is deafblind may use a higher volume to speak. They may make loud noises or be unaware of the volume of their voice.
- An individual could be wearing a hearing aid, a cochlear implant, traveling with a cane, wearing bioptics, wearing dark sunglasses, have a pocket Braille writer, or use a magnifier.
- A guide dog or a sighted guide person may accompany them.
- The same common characteristics of deafness may also apply to a deaf-blind person.

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### If You Suspect a Vision and Hearing Sensory Loss

- Approach a deaf-blind person with a gentle touch to the arm or shoulder.
- Identify yourself by name and role in the community. You may need to sign in the palm of the person’s hand.
- Allow the person to feel your badge, handcuffs, medical bag and/or any other identifiable objects. This will help to identify you as a first responder.
- If you think that a person is deaf-blind, do not leave them in an open area; guide them to the side of the room or guide them to a chair or landmark where they will be safe.

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### If You Suspect a Vision and Hearing Sensory Loss

- When guiding a person, do not hold their arm but allow them to hold onto your arm. Explain where you are walking to.
- Explain the surroundings, in detail as much as possible.
- Communicate all “emergent and necessary” information with the individual in the most efficient way until an interpreter is available.
- Do not restrain a person’s arms or hands needed for communication.
- Listen to their concerns and respond accordingly. Most individuals know their strengths and limitations and can communicate them to you.

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### Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism or autism spectrum disorder, refers to a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, communication, speech and nonverbal communication.

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

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### Common Characteristics of Autism

- Someone with autism may find it hard to use expressive communication. Many are non-verbal.
- 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 may be hard for them to 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 with their own interest or thoughts.

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### Common Characteristics of Autism

- 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 responses to stimuli.
- Someone with autism may have a fixation on a specific object or topic. They can become agitated and confused when interrupted. They can daydream and have limited motivation.
- There can be numerous physical actions with an autistic individual. These may include swaying, rocking, tapping, hand flapping, repetitive movements, kicking, and/or fidgeting. Self abusive behaviors are often present such as biting, hitting, scratching, head banging, hair pulling etc.

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### If You Suspect Someone Has Autism

- Some people with autism do not have a normal range of sensations. They may not feel cold, heat, or pain in a typical manner. They may fail to acknowledge pain in spite of it being obvious. They may show an unusual pain response that could include laughter, humming, singing, and/or removal of clothing.
- People with autism often have tactile (touch) issues. Band-Aids or other similar products may produce an emotional response and increase anger or aggression.

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### If You Suspect Someone Has Autism

- Move slowly when performing an exam. Explain what you plan to do in advance. Walk through each step, explain 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 asking questions, be patient while the individual is attempting to answer.

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### If You Suspect Someone Has Autism

- When performing an exam, 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 exam will consist of on another person first may help the person with autism have a better understanding and visual knowledge.

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### Mobility Impairments

- Mobility impairment 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.

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### Common Characteristics of Individuals with Mobility Impairments

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

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### Common Characteristics of Individuals with Mobility Impairments

- Irregular gait and balance
- Difficulty with transfer
- Range of motion limitation.
- Requires assistance with ambulation.
- Use of mobility aids such as walkers, canes, wheelchairs, leg braces, prosthetics, etc.

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### 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.

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