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FHP has worked to end housing discrimination in Vermont through fair housing education and outreach since 1995.

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Communicating with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing
About the Fair Housing Project and this Book

The Fair Housing Project is the only organization in Vermont dedicated to eradicating housing discrimination through education and outreach. We offer fair housing information to individuals, organizations and communities across the state.

In 2012, the state of Vermont completed an Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice, a document that identifies the various policies and decisions that may play a role in limiting housing choice. One outcome of that research was a determination that hearing people sometimes discriminated against people who are deaf due to problems with communication.

This guide was created to help address that impediment. Our goal is to help hearing people better communicate with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, thereby reducing discrimination.

CVOEO Fair Housing Project
802-864-3334 x102
800-287-7971 x102
www.cvoeo.org

Resources

CVOEO Fair Housing Project
Tel: 802-864-3334 x102
Toll Free: 800-287-7971 x102
www.cvoeo.org

Vermont Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Tel: 802-258-9500
VideoPhone: 802-275-0130
www.vcdhh.org

The Vermont Center for Independent Living
Tel: 802-229-0501 (V/TTY)
Toll Free: 800-639-1522 (V/ TTY)
www.vcil.org

Vermont Interpreter Referral Service
Tel: 802-254-3920 (V/TTY)
Video Phone: 802-275-0104 (VP)
Toll Free: 800-639-1519 (V/TTY)
www.virs.org

Sources


Special Situations

If you work at a doctor’s office or hospital…
When a patient has a hearing or speaking impairment, let everybody who will be interacting with them know what to expect and how best to communicate, to save the patient the effort of explaining to five different people. You may need to approach the patient in the waiting room to get their attention, rather than calling their name from the door.

If you are a waiter or waitress…
Place the bill in the middle of the table. Don't assume a person cannot pay because they are deaf.

If you are travelling or you work at an airport, bus station, or train station…
When important messages are delivered over a loudspeaker, make sure to share them in writing with people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

If you run a meeting or a classroom…
- Face the class, not the board, when speaking.
- Write down important information.
- Repeat questions before answering.
- Don't let the microphone hide your lips.
- Ensure good lighting.

Communication Tips

Get the attention of the person with whom you wish to speak by…
- Standing in front of them and saying their name (if they have some hearing).
- Tapping lightly on their arm or shoulder.
- Knocking on their desk or wall next to them.
- From a distance, waving and catching eye contact.
- If no one else is in the room, flashing the lights.

Start by asking, “What is the best way to communicate?” Some deaf people can speak if they lost their hearing late in life or if they studied the art of speaking. Some can lip read, although only 35% of what is said with lip reading is understood. Others may prefer to communicate through a sign language interpreter or to exchange written notes.

For communication at a distance, technology offers many options such as text message, instant message, or e-mail. There are also phone relay systems, in which a deaf person and a hearing person communicate through a third-party interpreter. The hearing person can speak to the interpreter, and the interpreter relays the message by signing into a video camera or typing out what is said.
If someone has indicated that they can lip read, stand a normal distance apart, with your face easily visible and well lit. Speak normally. Don’t chew gum or otherwise contort the normal shape of your mouth while speaking! Remember not to turn around, look down, or cover your mouth with your hand.

It’s easier for your conversation partner to lip read if…
- There is good lighting.
- You’re sitting together, not walking somewhere.
- One person in a group speaks at a time.

If your conversation partner is hard of hearing but can understand some speech, follow these tips to make yourself easier to understand.
- Face the person when speaking.
- Speak slightly louder, but don’t shout.
- Enunciate, but don’t exaggerate.
- Err on the side of saying too much rather than too little. Sometimes, by saying more, you give your listener a better chance of catching your meaning.
- If you run into trouble, use synonyms or rephrase your message.
- Spell out difficult words.

It’s easier to hear if…
- There’s not a lot of background noise.
- Only one person is speaking at once.
- The room isn’t echo-y.

More Landlord Advice:
Reasonable Accommodations and Modifications

Reasonable accommodations are changes to rules or policies so that a person with a disability can have full enjoyment of the premises. Reasonable modifications are changes to physical space. People who are deaf or hard of hearing have the right to request reasonable accommodations and modifications.

An example of a reasonable accommodation would be communicating in writing instead of speech or granting permission for the tenant to keep a service animal like a hearing dog. An example of a reasonable modification would be permission to install a doorbell that flashes instead of ringing.

The Fair Housing Act requires a housing provider to grant requests for reasonable accommodations or modifications if:
- there is a connection between the request and the disability and
- the accommodation / modification will not cause an undue financial or administrative burden.

If you have any questions about fair housing, call the CVOEO Fair Housing Project at (802) 864-3334 x102 or 1-800-287-7971 x102 or e-mail fhp@cvoeo.org.
Advice for Landlords, Lenders, and Realtors

People who are deaf or hard of hearing are protected by the Fair Housing Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act. As a landlord, mortgage lender, or realtor, you must give people who are deaf or hard of hearing the same opportunity to rent a unit, obtain a mortgage, or buy a home as you would give a similar hearing person.

This means you need to be flexible about your methods of communication. A tenant or potential tenant may call you or ask you to call via a relay service. On a relay service, you speak to an interpreter, and the interpreter will communicate with your caller by typing or signing on video screens. That way each of you communicates in a way that is comfortable to you. In person, your tenant may ask to communicate in writing or through an interpreter.

If you are a mortgage lender, title company, or real estate agent, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires you to provide interpretation services for your clients, upon request with reasonable notice, so they can understand the documents they sign.

When deciding whether to rent, sell, or lend to a person, base your decision on their credit and rental history, not on their identity as a person who is deaf or hard of hearing.

Facial expressions and gestures can help communication in both directions. You can help get your message across with gestures and facial expressions -- wrinkle your nose to show disgust, or give the thumbs-up sign to show approval. You can also watch the facial expressions of your conversation partner for signs of comprehension or confusion.

Many deaf people communicate in sign language, a complete language composed of gestures and hand movements. Different deaf cultures have different sign languages. For example, French Sign Language is different than American Sign Language. Many schools offer classes in American Sign Language, if you would like to learn. There are also professional interpreters who translate American Sign Language to spoken English. Remember – not all deaf people speak sign language. Some people prefer to write, type, lip read, or speak.

A piece of interpreter etiquette: If you are speaking to a person who is deaf through an interpreter, make eye contact with the deaf person you are speaking to, not the interpreter.
People who are deaf cannot hear their own voices, so their speech may sound different than that of a hearing person. Try to let go of your assumptions about the sound of someone’s voice. Slurred speech doesn’t mean the person is drunk! Some deaf people may not be able to communicate emotion through the tone of their voice, but a flat voice doesn’t mean they’re angry. If you don’t understand a person with a speaking impairment, try to eliminate any background noise and ask them to repeat. **Don’t just nod and smile!**

If you’re carrying on a conversation through lip reading or sign language, but you want to make sure you understand each other, **put important information (names, telephone numbers) in writing.**

When reading notes from a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, remember that for people who communicate mostly in sign language, English is a second language. Their grammar or word choice may be unconventional.

**Telephone Technologies**

Many deaf people use a telephone or video relay service to communicate with hearing people by telephone. A third-party interpreter helps the two of you speak to each other. The deaf person can sign into a videophone or type into a special machine (teletypewriter, or TTY). An interpreter receives the call and translates into spoken English. If you are on the other end, you can speak to the interpreter and your side of the conversation will be translated back into text or sign language for the person who is deaf. Telecommunications relay services are available for free nationwide.

If a phone number is marked “TTY,” “videophone,” or “vp,” you can expect to be automatically connected to a relay service when you call.