

Help! We have a referral of someone Deaf – what shall we do?

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A deaf woman who was being abused by her boyfriend decided to seek shelter at a local domestic violence program in her small town in Texas. To her dismay, she discovered that the staff did not know what to do – they would talk to her without making eye contact and just tried to write notes back and forth with her. She noticed that the shelter had a TTY but it was sitting under the hotline desk, covered with dust and she was told that their telephone system could not be used with a TTY. The staff tried to be helpful by telling her to go to police station to make a report on her own, but did not offer to go with her or prepare her for the type of questions that law enforcement might ask. She thought about going to the police station, but decided instead to just go back to her home to her abuser because she believed that the police would probably not be helpful either. She had lost faith in hearing people being able to help and understand her. She figured that it would be better for her to go back to an unhealthy and abusive environment where she had at least had access to communication and her primary language.

This is a true story that can happen any where. We can all become prepared to work with deaf individuals who may need our services to prevent them from feeling victimized by the systems that are supposed to help them. A few years ago, TCFV provided all family violence programs in Texas with ADA kits which include a TTY and other equipment to support accessibility for deaf individuals who may use services. It is important that advocates and hotline staff be aware and prepared on how to use a TTY and relay services. Each state contracts with a relay service, which provides relay operators called [communication assistants](#) (CAs) who participate in a relay call by typing what the person you called says, so you can read it. The CA will voice what you type for the other person to hear what you typed. Also there is relay also provides [IP-Relay](#) which allows you to make relay calls from any computer connected to the Internet. One good thing about IP-Relay is that the calls are completely free, since they don't use the phone system for long distance, but use the Internet instead.

TTYs are no longer the most popular technology used by most individuals from the deaf community. Many deaf individuals now use text pagers or video phones (face to face relay services on TV monitor for communication). Having a TTY available for a deaf client to use will most likely be appreciated though as will offers to schedule sign language interpreters for appointments with advocates or counselors. For information on available interpreting agencies in your community, contact the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services.

It is also helpful in preparing to serve the deaf community for staff to have training about deaf culture and to at least know some basic signs. The term Deaf (capitalized) refers to people with hearing loss who identify as part of the Deaf socio-linguistic and cultural group. Deaf culture does not perceive hearing loss and deafness as a disability, but as the basis of a distinct cultural group because we own our language, behavior, and norms. Please check [Accessing Safety Initiative | Understanding Deaf Culture](#) for more information about working with individuals who are deaf.