

# For Deaf community, COVID-19 presents unique problems

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This word file does not include the many photos in the original. I received the article from Robin Chan who is aware I wanted to share it with others. [Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Robin Chan] Following is a link to the story: <https://norwell.wickedlocal.com/news/20200609/for-deaf-community-covid-19-presents-unique-problems>

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Social distancing and wearing masks are vital in flattening the curve and preventing needless painful deaths at the hands of COVID-19. However the use of masks has been disempowering for the Deaf community because their independence has been stripped from them as communication is now a one way street leaving them in the dark.

The Deaf community consists of Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, late-Deafness, and DeafBlind. Because the DeafBlind rely so much on touch to navigate the world, they are especially impacted by COVID-19 and the requirements of social distancing. They often have providers that assist them through touch and now they aren't able to help because of fear of spreading COVID-19.

Masks not only covers lips that prevent the Deaf from lip reading, but it also obscures important body language cues that communicate intent and emotion. Going to the pharmacy or the supermarket is now an anxiety inducing ordeal. Inadvertent conflicts develop because people are talking to Deaf people without them knowing.

Robbie Martin, Director of the American Sign Language program at Deaf Inc., conducts classes in the South Shore, South Coast, and Boston. He will be teaching ASL classes remotely over the summer. Robbie is Deaf himself and he experienced an argument at the supermarket because of masks.

“I went food shopping and someone was talking to me and I honestly had no idea because I can’t hear and couldn’t see their lips moving. So they got my attention, and I was like, ‘Oh, you’re talking to me.’ And they started to give me attitude. They rolled their eyes at me.”

This also happened to Karen Cobb of Quincy who has late-Deafness as a result of a genetic condition. She is a stay at home mom of a 15 year old who is Deaf and autistic. She was shopping at a grocery store and another customer touched her to grab her attention which startled her but also frightened her because of the potential exposure to disease.

On another errand, her talk to text app failed to pick up the conversation of a postal worker while trying to mail a package to her older sister. The mask, shield, and distance proved too much for the app. Hearing aides require mental energy to filter white noise from important noise. They can also be headache inducing for her.

Despite their best intentions, she gets upset if people lower their masks to talk because she feels she is putting them at risk.

“It’s a very fine line that Deaf people need to walk during the pandemic. Because we need clear communication in order to continue on with our daily lives but in the back of our heads, or at least in my head, we have to be careful not to put anyone at risk.”

She has been fighting to get the proper access to public meetings like major public health announcements, city council meetings, and school meetings for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing before and during the pandemic. Some of the most vulnerable to COVID-19 are Hard-of-Hearing. Having an interpreter at the Governor’s and Boston Mayor’s press conference has been great, but it’s not as prevalent on the local level or even at White House press briefings. As town officials are adjusting town meeting for COVID-19, they need to consider how the

disabled members of their community will be able to participate or risk violating ADA laws.

While Zoom has been helpful during the pandemic, it is a challenge for the Deaf when the video freezes because of poor connection or if there are a hundred people in a meeting and there is no way to lip read the tiny screens. Simple measures like captioning meetings and leaving an email contact in addition to a phone number on websites would be a good start.

Karen recently had a frustrating experience with the school district her daughter is in which didn't caption their Zoom meeting with the school superintendent and only offered a transcription after the meeting ended. That wasn't enough because she wouldn't be able to advocate for her child during the meeting like other parents can.

“I want to participate during the meeting as a Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing parent for my child. You're still committing exclusion. You are a public school. This is a public meeting. It's not okay to exclude anybody.”

The experience of the pandemic depends greatly on socio-economic status and that certainly applies to the Deaf. Some people have secure jobs that allow them the freedom to work from home. They have the ability to buy necessities online, stay connected with friends and loved ones on Zoom, and to binge on Netflix and other streaming services. Others may not have smartphones or may have lost jobs and are now facing the reality of rent and bills due at the end of the month with little savings and no opportunities in sight. Because most Deaf people lacked access to educational opportunity, they often find themselves in the more vulnerable position on the socio-economic ladder.

In a short amount of time, Catarina Lima, a regional director in the South Shore, South Coast, and Cape and Islands for Deaf Inc., and her staff have adapted their services to help the Deaf during the pandemic. It's a laborious process of providing step by step instructions to use Zoom just to figure out their clients' needs, but they are making the effort to help their consumers and determine what their needs are. She stresses that interpreters are available through the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing for doctor's appointments or other needs.

Devon Hosteltler, an independent living specialist at Deaf Inc., works with Deaf people who are trying to live on their own. COVID-19 presents new challenges to their independence.

“Some may not have the accessible technology. They are used to going out in person to get the services they need... But now, they may need a video phone or a caption phone, they need a computer, they need internet, it all depends on what they have.”

Deaf Inc. provides four core services: advocacy, skills training, information and referral, and peer counseling. They help with technology and skills training like personal finances and budgeting.

Some Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing who were independent before the pandemic, now feel helpless at times. For Catarina Lima, who identifies as Hard-of-Hearing, this has been her experience.

“I like to be very independent. I don’t like to accept help. I want to feel I can do whatever I need to do...there’s too many barriers now so I may ask for help a little more, and that does not feel great... because I like to be independent.”

Right now, paramedics wear PPE when responding to emergencies to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, their masks obscure their lips. Norwell fire chief, Andrew Reardon acknowledges that problem for the Deaf.

“It’s very difficult to interview someone who has the challenge of hearing your question. More importantly, the response from that individual if you’re not trained to understand the nuances of sign language, and the emotion or the concepts that are contained in the communication, it becomes even more difficult to provide adequate services.”

Residents can help their local paramedics by including important health information through the reverse 911 system so they can be prepared in an emergency situation.

Chief Reardon said technology will play a role in the future. However, he recognizes that more can be done for the Deaf.

“I can’t imagine. It must be scary. It’s one of those challenges that I think we should address but unfortunately, it’s not something we have addressed.”

Sen. Patrick O’Connor is on the Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities, and he is keeping in mind the needs of all people with disabilities while the state reopens. He also understands how isolating it must feel for the Deaf.

“We want, as possible as we can, to get life back to normal for everybody, but in particular to make that ... people with disabilities are at the forefront of everything we do and think about and we’re going to make sure that all the protections that you’ve had in place are still there as we navigate this pandemic.”

If there are issues that the Deaf face during the reopening, he urges that they contact both the commissioner for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing and to reach out to their local state politician to inform them of their difficulties so they can tweak the guidance for reopening.

“I do think government will play a role. I think the community will play a huge role and I think that businesses and individuals in their own right, as the governor always said, we all have our role to play here” and I think one of those roles to be more accommodating and to know that individuals may have certain circumstances that limit their ability to communicate.”

He said he hopes we as a people can be more patient during this pandemic.

“We do need to be more cognizant as a society that there are people out there that have disabilities and with the mask, no pun intended, we’re literally masking some of the typical abilities that we would have to know that person has a disability and to be more accommodating [to them].”

Karen Cobb understands we are all experiencing the pandemic together.

“It is frustrating. I’m trying to be with an attitude that we are all in this together. My getting upset and angry about it isn’t going to make them feel any better and it’s not going to make the situation better.”

She hopes the public understands the Deaf are also out in the community.

“Don’t just think about yourself. Be aware if someone is having trouble understanding, be patient. Think outside the box.”

“Just be patient with us and we’ll be patient with you.”