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Your rights under the ADA do not disappear during an emergency. But the Hearing Loss Association of America advises, whether you are at work or school, to reach out first to make sure your access needs are known.

The ADA and COVID-19

BY LISE HAMLIN

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) will be 30 years old this year on July 26. Some of us remember what life was like before the ADA. No question, for people with disabilities, life was a daily struggle. But now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we face new and different struggles.

One of our newest struggles is with Zoom, GoToMeetings, and other online conferencing platforms. These terrific platforms can bring workplace meetings, students and teachers, and family and friends together at a time when we cannot physically be in the same place at the same time. But once again, we are faced with access barriers to overcome: captioning on many of these platforms is not a slam dunk thing. And some that do provide for captions make it difficult to get the captions unless you pay for a premium service.

HLAA Board of Directors Adopts Position Paper for COVID-19 Online Access

The HLAA Board of Directors has responded to this new development with a Position Statement regarding online captioning during this pandemic, focused on casual conversations with family and friends. Employers, schools, and health care providers who use telemedicine should all still be providing CART on request. And consumers with hearing loss should be requesting that. But for many seeking time with family and friends, the cost of captioning is beyond what we are able to personally absorb. During this pandemic, when there are few other options for face-to-face contact, these captions should be free, and available with the use of Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) captioning. HLAA supports free captioning for casual conversations during this pandemic. For the paper on access via captioning for online video conferencing platforms, visit hearingloss.org/wp-content/uploads/Position_Paper_Free_ASR_Personal_Use_During_COVID-19.pdf. For the section on position papers, visit hearingloss.org/about-hlaa/position-papers/.

Your Rights Under the ADA

We should not forget, however, that your rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) don't disappear in a time of emergency. HLAA receives calls from employers or consumers who simply don't know what kinds of accommodations in the workplace are best or even possible under the ADA in the best of times. Faced with new or old barriers, many of us simply don't know what we need to know about the ADA or about the accommodations we are entitled to 30 years after the ADA was signed into law. Nor do we know what to do when old communication methods break down. When we end up in the hospital or even a store where everyone is wearing masks, what do we do?

That's one reason HLAA developed our "Resources During COVID-19" page on our website: hearingloss.org/coronavirus-covid-19-resources. We want to be sure that people with hearing loss get the information they need during this pandemic to navigate these difficult times.

In collaboration with other organizations serving people who have a hearing loss or who are Deaf, we have posted several pages on our website to help. We focused on how to be prepared for your own communication access if you need to

go to the hospital during this pandemic. We have information on accessible telehealth. We also provided information about teleworking and access to online schoolwork. In addition to all that, we have included information from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), links to our COVID-19 webinars and blogs, and other useful information for these difficult times. We even posted an article about how to have a mask that doesn't interfere with your hearing aids or cochlear implants.

HLAA Responds to Consumers During COVID-19

Not only have we been posting information to our website, HLAA is responding to direct requests for help via email from consumers on a range of issues. Some report problems with Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service (IP CTS). The FCC has relaxed requirements for speed of answer for IP CTS. We understand this could be a burden, particularly when you have an urgent call or need to navigate a phone menu to get to the person you really want to speak to. However, it should be no surprise that there has been an increase in the use of IP CTS during this pandemic. Those of us stuck at home want or need to use the phone to reach friends and family, to get information, or for work, much more than before the

pandemic. These calls are lasting longer. At the same time, IP CTS call centers, like everyone else, must comply with social distancing rules so staff may need to shift to working from home. All of this takes time for IP CTS providers to come up to speed. We are happy they are still there, despite the disruptions. Still, if you have continued frustration, don't hesitate to contact the FCC at dro@fcc.org to let them know where you are having problems.

Local news channels providing important COVID-19 information from the governor's office, health department, or local officials, with poor or absent captioning have been another pain point for consumers. When consumers reach out to us, we work with them and the FCC to address those problems.

Rest assured that while HLAA staff is hunkered down at home, like so many of you during this COVID-19 pandemic, we will continue to work hard for you. We will continue to provide information, education, and support to people with hearing loss, and look forward to the time when we no longer will be talking about COVID-19. **HL**

Lise Hamlin is director of public policy at HLAA. Reach her at lhamlin@hearingloss.org.



GET IN THE
HEARING
LOOP

It's Time to
Get in the
Hearing Loop

Many people aren't yet aware of hearing loops or other technologies that can improve communication access and public engagement, or how they can enrich the lives of people with hearing loss, their families, friends, colleagues and even communities. The Get in the Hearing Loop Program is changing that—one loop, one advocate, one Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) request at a time.

Get in the Hearing Loop, a communication access program of HLAA, is dedicated to providing and promoting community education, advocacy on behalf of people with hearing loss, and consultation services to help venues of all kinds successfully implement hearing loop technology.

We dream of a world where people with hearing loss can thrive each day with communication access, full inclusion and equal participation in all aspects of life, everywhere they go.

For more information about hearing loops and the Get in the Hearing Loop Program, visit hearingloss.org/GITHL or email GITHLinfo@hearingloss.org.