



hearingloss.org

POSITION STATEMENT

Free Access to Automatic Captioning for People with Hearing Loss to Support Social Engagement, During the COVID Pandemic

Summary: HLAA, the U.S. leader in advocacy for people with hearing loss, calls for all online video call and conferencing platforms to offer free (no-cost) access to automatic captioning technology to people with hearing loss at the same level that platforms offer to their premium customers, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because social engagement and connection is a basic human need, HLAA has fought long and hard on behalf of people with hearing loss for access to the highest quality captions across all media, from captioned phones and TV shows to internet content. Without this access to high quality captioning, many people with hearing loss—who often struggle to understand speech over electronic media—would be unable to access much mainstream communication.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more personal social engagement occurs via online video calling and conferencing platforms such as those offered by Zoom, Google, and Microsoft.

However, many people with hearing loss are unable to use these online video applications for calls with their families and friends because captions are typically not available on the free “consumer” version. Even people with mild hearing losses often say, “I can hear but I can't understand.” This leaves people with hearing loss unable to communicate well with loved ones, especially during this crisis period.

While some services support captions by trained human speech transcribers—CART writers, the gold standard for captioning—the need for captioning vastly outstrips the availability of trained CART writers during this crisis period.

Some online conferencing platforms provide or support captions generated by automatic speech recognition algorithms (ASR captions). However most services provide or support access to ASR captioning only to their “premium,” i.e., paying, customers (for example, businesses and schools). While the free ASR captioning available on some services is too slow to be usable by people with hearing loss, good ASR captioning technologies do exist that can be very helpful in certain situations including personal calls and family conferencing. However, ASR captioning at this level is often locked behind a prohibitively expensive paywall for many users with hearing loss.



hearingloss.org

HLAA calls for all video calling and conferencing companies to provide or support free (no-cost) access to their premium-quality ASR captioning at the same level that they offer to their premium customers, to people with hearing loss.

We want to be clear that accessibility is a legal obligation under various laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and other health laws as well as state and local laws. In situations beyond the “personal use” case described here, people with hearing loss are entitled to effective communication for distance learning, telemedicine and employment-related meetings. HLAA has a long history of supporting access to effective communication in educational, clinical and employment settings, and will continue to do so during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The need for social engagement—a basic human need—is paramount, especially during this period of global crisis. Accordingly, all free online video calling and conferencing platforms should be accessible to people with hearing loss for their personal use at no additional cost, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adopted by the HLAA Board: May 5, 2020
Expires after one year unless renewed.