

TRANSCRIPT

Effective Communications with Law Enforcement Officers (Police)

Question 7: When to Request a Sign Language Interpreter

Michael Baer, Emergency and Public Communication Access Program Coordinator

Good, now let's talk about communication and specifically, interpreters. You know there are different situations that arise, like getting pulled over on the road. Should an interpreter be required for that? Conversely, if a person is arrested and brought to the police station, should he/she ask for an interpreter? What situations warrant the use of an interpreter and where is that line drawn? I understand each situation is different, but when is a request for an interpreter considered reasonable?

Chief Ted Baran, Director of Campus Security at Gallaudet University

It's really important that the Deaf person knows their rights. We can't assume that the police are knowledgeable of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In fact, I would assume that most officers aren't. So, that's a great question. Really, it's incumbent on the Deaf or Hard of Hearing person to fight for and to advocate for their own communication access. You mentioned getting pulled over on the road. To provide an interpreter for that situation, it's really not a reasonable accommodation for such a short encounter with the police. Also, if you required an interpreter for something like that, it could take 2-3 hours before an interpreter could arrive, so it's not reasonable. Typically, that kind of interaction tends to be short in duration. Either the police officer will write a ticket, waive it, or give a warning. Again, what's most important is to cooperate. For communication purposes, try to get it over with as soon as possible. But again, the officer is not required to provide an interpreter for that kind of situation. Where that line is drawn is when you are taken into custody. Yes, one hundred percent, you have a right to an interpreter. Whether you are a witness, suspect, or victim, any time an officer needs to gather information from you, ask for an interpreter. Try to educate them as well. You can say, "I need an interpreter" or "I need a qualified interpreter." You can get an interpreter and you should have the right to ask for one, for sure. If you are arrested, for sure, you should have an interpreter. If an officer questions you, writing back and forth is not adequate, that's for sure. Also, using a person who is not a qualified interpreter or using a family member to interpret is ill-advised. You should ask for a qualified interpreter.

