



National Institutes of Health
Turning Discovery Into Health

Guidelines for Mentoring an NIH Group Member who is Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

Overview

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is globally recognized for its biomedical research and training initiatives. From early-career programs like the NIH Summer Internship Program (SIP) to advanced offerings, such as the postdoctoral Intramural Research Training Award/Visiting Fellow programs, the NIH is committed to fostering diverse, inclusive, equitable, and fully accessible training experiences for all members in intramural research groups.

This guide aims to demystify the process of preparing for and mentoring individuals who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing (D/HH) within intramural research groups and provides concrete suggestions to facilitate genuine inclusivity. In addition to trainees, intramural research groups may also include D/HH staff members, and the guide offers resources beneficial to any mentors/supervisors with a group member who is D/HH. Developed with input from various NIH entities and available resources, this guide is designed to support the appointment of group members who are D/HH to research groups across the NIH Intramural Research Program.

Getting Started: Interviewing a Potential Group Member who is Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

Interviewing Candidates for your Group

Following a rigorous and open search, interviews play a critical role in appointing new members to any group. They provide mentors with the opportunity to identify individuals with the optimal combination of foundational knowledge, skills, and abilities for success. When interviewing candidates with disabilities, mentors may feel uncertain about appropriate actions or questions. The following provides general guidance on navigating the interview process with candidates who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing (D/HH).

The level of support needed for applicants who are D/HH may vary. The NIH is committed to providing reasonable accommodations when requested. Prior to the interview, discuss with the applicant their needs for any reasonable accommodation during the interview. An example of language to include in an email to a candidate who is D/HH could be:

If you need a reasonable accommodation, such as a sign language interpreter or a live captioner, to participate in this interview, do not hesitate to contact me at (email).

American Sign Language (ASL) interpreting or real-time transcription services (also known as Communication Access Realtime Translation or CART) will be provided at no cost when requested by any member of the NIH. Talking with the candidate's references may also require these arrangements. You can request an interpreter or real-time transcription services (CART) through the [NIH Office of Research Services](#). If additional Reasonable Accommodation requests other than ASL and CART services are needed, you can arrange them through the [NIH Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion \(EDI\)](#).

See **Appendix A** for specific instructions and the lead time needed to arrange for sign language interpreting and real-time transcription (CART).

Applicants who are D/HH are equally capable of conducting biomedical research. Thus, your expectations during the interview process should align with those for any other potential group members. If the interview is in person and the candidate uses a sign language interpreter, see the section below "Working with a Sign Language Interpreter." If possible, facilitate a connection with other NIH researchers who are D/HH during the interview process.

Preparing to Welcome a Group Member who is D/HH

Prior to the Group Member's Arrival

Once an individual has indicated interest in joining your group or accepted an offer, your next steps involve setting up the necessary support systems for effective communication. This will include the following:

- Inquire in writing about any specific assistance the individual may need for communicating, such as a sign language interpreter or another professional who is proficient in the mentee's preferred communication method.
- If applicable, contact the NIH Office of Research Services (ORS) to schedule a regular sign language interpreter(s) and identify the scientific vocabulary that the interpreter will require. See **Appendix A** for instructions on how to arrange for these services.
- Clarify computer requirements to accommodate any necessary software.
- If necessary, allocate a designated desk space for the sign language interpreter or alternative professional.
- If applicable, provide the sign language interpreter(s) with a tour of the research space and introductions to the team.
- Consider contacting the [Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion \(EDI\)](#) at edi.people@nih.gov to arrange a seminar on ableism to enhance interpersonal skills among laboratory members working with individuals who are D/HH.
- Arrange for your group members to connect with staff from other groups that have included members who are D/HH. Consider that these meetings may require an interpreter.
- Provide group members with resources to familiarize themselves with effective communication strategies for individuals who are D/HH. These can include articles, brochures, pamphlets, social media, and discussions with NIH trainees or staff who are D/HH. See **Appendix B** for NIH resources and **Appendix C** for additional resources.

Planning for Safety

It may be necessary to obtain interpreting services on an emergency basis. Emergency situations include providing interpreting services for the NIH Occupational Medical Service (OMS), the NIH Employee Assistance Program (EAP), police and ambulance emergencies, and doctor-patient meetings outside normal business hours, Federal holidays, and weekends.

The dedicated number for interpreting services is 1-571-730-4330.

Consider the following workplace safety measures for individuals who are D/HH:

- *Fire Alarm Accessibility*: evaluate the location of the fire alarm (light) in relation to the group member's workspace. Modifications beyond building code requirements, such as additional strobe lighting for the fire alarm system, must be funded at the individual NIH Institute/Center level.
- *Adapted Safety Plans*: revise any safety plans to accommodate the specific needs of the group member.
- *Safety Drill Planning*: organize a safety drill to familiarize the group with any special actions that may be required to assist the D/HH group member.
- *Communication Assistance for Safety Classes*: for safety classes not available online, arrange for a sign language interpreter or other communication assistance.

Creating an Inclusive Environment for Group Members who are D/HH

Setting Expectations

Individuals who are D/HH possess strengths and weaknesses, just like anyone else. Your expectations for their performance should be consistent with those for individuals who are not D/HH. Accommodations should prioritize establishing effective communication systems to ensure that the D/HH individual may actively participate as an engaged member of the team, both in professional and social contexts.

An inclusive environment is one that fosters mutual respect, equity, and recognition of the value of differences that everyone brings to the team, regardless of background. Clearly communicating these organizational values promotes a trusting and welcoming environment.

In research settings, it is advisable for each group to establish a compact/welcome letter that explicitly delineates expectations regarding working hours, meeting frequency, research advancements, safety protocols, and more. Reciprocally, this document should also specify what each group member can expect from their supervisor. For more information about compacts/welcome letters, you can refer to [these examples from the NIH Office of Intramural Research](#).

Working with a Sign Language Interpreter

Working with a language interpreter, whether it is a spoken language or a sign language, may be a new experience for you and your group. Remember that the interpreter is not part of the conversation, but rather they are your “conduit” so each person may communicate effectively. Following the guidelines below will support your relationship with a D/HH group member:

- Introduce yourself to the sign language interpreter at the beginning of the conversation, but otherwise, do not engage directly with the interpreter.
- Clarify that the interpreter will communicate what you have said and not interpret its meaning to the group member.
- Do not ask the interpreter’s opinion.

- Stay in constant eye contact with the group member (and not the interpreter), focusing your attention on them.
- Let the group member and the interpreter position themselves as needed. Usually, the interpreter will stand at your side so that both people who are signing face one another. Group discussions may take a few more moments to find the optimal positions for all who are part of the conversation.
- Lighting may need to be considered.
- Speak and gesture naturally. If the group member relies on lip reading, they are likely to focus on the interpreter's hands and face, your lips, and your gestures to comprehend the entire conversation. Resist the urge to speak louder or overly enunciate.
- If repetition is needed, use different words.
- Be sensitive of a slight time lag in interpreting. You should speak at a normal pace and follow the usual rules in conversation, allowing for pauses where appropriate. In some cases, it may be helpful to slow the pace of your speech, but you should invite the group member to ask for adjustments as needed.
- If the group member would like to interject, pause to allow the interpreter time to communicate the comment(s).
- Schedule meetings with the interpreter and the group member to identify any communication issues that need to be addressed.

Communicating Generally with a Group Member who is D/HH

- Establish a clear communication plan for emergencies in the building.
- Identify and respect the preferred method of getting attention of the D/HH group member (e.g., touching their shoulder).
- Discuss in advance with the D/HH group member if they require sign language interpreting services or CART (real-time transcription) for meetings, seminars, and other events within the group and across campus. [Video relay](#), where the D/HH individual signs to a camera and an interpreter relays to speech, is another option.
- Effective communication relies on quality sign language interpretation. Though planning ahead is critical, the D/HH member may choose to arrange interpreting services themselves for recurring seminars or meetings, particularly if they have a preferred interpreter. It is important to note that interpreter proficiency can vary, especially for scientific language.
- Allow extra time for sign language interpreting during meetings with the group member.
- Maintain eye contact, especially if the group member reads lips. Ensure proper communication in masked environments (such as in facilities with a Biological Safety Level (BSL) of 2 or higher, clinical settings, or other instances when group members wear masks for protection from disease transmission). Effective communication with individuals wearing masks should include awareness of an individual who is D/HH, speaking loudly/clearly if necessary, and considering alternatives like masks with a clear window or clear face shields.
- Consider scheduling informal discussions with the D/HH group member (and interpreter if needed) to foster inclusivity.

Mentoring the Group Member

Mentoring is a strategic approach to personnel development, facilitating the transfer of knowledge and skill. Regardless of whether a group member is formally appointed as a trainee, mentors share expertise, resources, organizational history, values, perspectives, and attitudes with the mentee. This accelerates the group member's learning curve, helping them acquire skills and knowledge and to achieve career development goals. Additionally, mentors gain the opportunity to enhance their expertise. Your Institute's or Center's (IC) Training Director can provide more information on mentoring and the mentoring process, along with a list of resources available from the NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE). To survey these resources, you can find a [list of NIH Training Directors](#) and explore [the OITE website](#). Some general best practices for mentoring a D/HH group member are:

- Clearly communicate with the group member about their projects and career goals. For trainees, this should take the form of an Individual Development Plan (IDP), but for other group members, this conversation may be less formal.
- Treat the group member as you would any other, referring to the individual first and mentioning their disability only as it relates to the topic being discussed.
- Assist other trainees in the research group with creating Individual Development Plans that include how each trainee will communicate with the D/HH group member.
- Assist the group member in networking with other individuals at the NIH who are D/HH (if this is desired by the group member).
- As the group member progresses in their career, actively expand their network to maximize exposure to other scientists or professionals who may be collaborators in the future. You may need to provide the collaborators with resources that support effective communication with individuals who are D/HH.
- Encourage the D/HH group member to attend conferences that support underrepresented communities and/or focus on the D/HH community specifically, even if the conference topic extends beyond their specific scientific area. This exposure can greatly benefit their professional development, career growth, and networking opportunities.

- To optimize support for your group member's presentations and scientific exchanges at conferences, it is crucial to advocate for or cover the expenses associated with travel for their preferred sign language interpreter, if applicable. Further details on the significance of traveling with an interpreter who is familiar with one's research can be found [here](#).
- As a mentor, establish your own network of colleagues who also have experience mentoring trainees who are D/HH.

Tips for Organizing/Supporting Attendance at Larger Meetings and Conferences

The following tips focus on creating inclusive and accessible conference environments for individuals who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing (D/HH). While primarily aimed at conference organizers and those involved in the planning process, everyone can contribute to supporting D/HH individuals within their own groups. You can do this by researching and sharing available accommodations or advocating for them with conference organizers. In addition to these tips, you can find additional resources and best practices for creating inclusive and welcoming conferences [here](#).

- *Communication Accessibility*: provide clear communication channels for D/HH attendees to request accommodations in advance. Include information about available accessibility services and how to request them on conference registration forms and event websites. Ensure automated captions/CART services are available for virtual meetings/talks/etc. and remind external hosts to enable this setting if necessary.
- *Sign Language Interpreters and CART Services*: arrange for qualified sign language interpreters and CART services for all main sessions, presentations, and keynotes. Additionally, make CART transcripts available after the event for future reference. Position interpreters prominently near stages or speaking areas for maximum visibility.
- *Reserved Seating*: reserve optimal seating for D/HH attendees (e.g., near interpreters or captioning screens). Offer priority seating to ensure clear sightlines to speakers and presentation materials.
- *Visual Materials*: provide visual materials, like presentations and handouts, in advance for easier comprehension by D/HH attendees. Ensure materials are accessible with clear fonts and high contrast for readability.
- *Poster Presentations*: place poster presenters who are D/HH at the end of the rows to reduce background noise and distractions. Encourage all presenters to offer printed copies of their posters for future reference. Arrange for interpreters to assist D/HH presenters or utilize CART with a remote setup (this involves providing a microphone to the speaker, with CART displayed on the D/HH attendee's phone). Preferably, select a human CART/captioner familiar with the presenter's subject matter to ensure accuracy. Encourage D/HH presenters to include their contact information on posters for further discussions with interested parties.

- *Accessible Technology*: offer assistive listening devices, portable hearing loops, or FM systems for individuals using hearing aids or cochlear implants. Provide access to real-time captioning apps or communication apps with live transcription features for easier communication. Consult with NIH Events Management regarding the availability of these technologies when selecting rooms for events held on an NIH campus.
- *Dedicated Support Personnel*: assign dedicated staff or volunteers to assist D/HH attendees throughout the conference, including guiding them to sessions (if desired) and addressing any accessibility concerns. For noisy environments like poster presentations, clarify if the D/HH individual needs assistance or accompaniment. Fellow lab members or trainees can also provide support, such as visiting posters together and comparing details after the session, which can be challenging to hear amid background noise.
- *Presenter Guidelines*: provide presenters with guidelines on inclusive communication practices, such as speaking clearly and using microphone amplification. Encourage presenters to repeat questions from the audience for clarity.
- *Inclusive Networking Opportunities*: host networking events in accessible locations with adequate lighting and minimal background noise. Facilitate inclusive networking opportunities, such as roundtable discussions, to minimize communication barriers.
- *Feedback Mechanism*: implement a feedback mechanism for D/HH attendees to provide input on the accessibility of the conference and the effectiveness of accommodations. Use feedback to improve future events and demonstrate a commitment to accessibility and inclusivity.

Supporting the Group Member's Career Advancement

One aspect of mentoring focuses on the mentee's transition to their next step, whether a promotion, another research or training experience, or a career change.

If a group member tells you that they plan to interview for another position or training experience, encourage them to make the necessary arrangements for reasonable accommodations with the host institution.

In a letter of recommendation, mentioning the hearing loss of the group member is a personal choice and should be discussed with them beforehand. The focus should primarily be on the individual's accomplishments and strengths.

Explore the possibility of joining an existing network for trainees and researchers who are D/HH or have experience with mentoring individuals who are D/HH. The NIH has an Abilities Resource Group (abilities-request@list.nih.gov) and a Deaf Employee Resource Group (deaf-nih@list.nih.gov). You may also reach out to Dr. Kent Hunter, who leads the [Deaf Student Training Program \(DSTP\)](#) at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and has successfully mentored numerous Deaf trainees in his research group.

APPENDIX A

Arranging for American Sign Language Interpreting, Computer Assisted Real-Time Transcription (CART), or Virtual Interpreting for Both Virtual and In-Person Events

NIH centralizes sign language interpreting services under one performance-based contract, to ensure equitable, reliable, and prompt delivery of these essential services to its Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing community.

The [ORS - Office Of Research Services | NIH](#) manages the [Interpreting Services \(nih.gov\)](#) program and **centrally funds** the contract that delivers American Sign Language (ASL) basic and scientific interpreters and Computer Assisted Real-Time Transcription (CART).

These essential services are available to employees and contractors, patients receiving treatment at the Clinical Center, their families, and visitors **requesting an accommodation**, to perform their job duties or participate in interviews, clinical studies, training seminars, and NIH-supported events or activities whether on-site at NIH [Research Campus Locations](#) or from an online virtual platform.

NIH Active Directory account holders can quickly and easily setup a user profile to start entering requests in the [Access Interpreting \(usked.com\)](#) portal or download the free [uSked](#) mobile app to iOS and Android devices. Both portal and app operate securely on the NIH network. Account access requires a username, password, and two-factor authentication.

NOTE: To ensure availability, service requests should be submitted at least 3-5 days before an event. Requests submitted less than 3 days before are not guaranteed. Cancellations submitted less than 2 business days before are billable. Changes or cancellations must be edited in the portal or mobile app and resubmitted to reenter the workflow. New requests entered but not submitted will be automatically saved but will not enter the workflow to be filled until submitted.

The Access scheduling team provides technical and scheduling support 24 hours a day and can be reached at nih@ainterpreting.com.

The program manager welcomes your feedback on quality service experience and other comments or questions about the program. She can be reached during normal business hours at kieferli@od.nih.gov.

APPENDIX B

National Institutes of Health (NIH) Resources for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

Office of Research Services Interpreting Services

Sign Language and CART Services System (See Appendix A for details)

Do You Know the A, B, C's of Signing?

Visit the [American Sign Language website](#) and watch instructional videos to learn the American Sign Language (ASL) alphabet along with a variety of commonly used words and phrases.

Deafness in the Workplace: A Panel Discussion

<http://videocast.nih.gov/summary.asp?live=11767>

On August 23, 2012, the Division of Amenities and Transportation Services (DATS) hosted a lively and enlightening discussion featuring a small panel of Deaf employees working at the National Institutes of Health. The panel and moderator discussed work-related challenges and communication issues between Deaf and hearing employees in the workplace.

Interacting and Working with People Who Are Deaf

<http://videocast.nih.gov/summary.asp?live=10976>

On March 29, 2012, DATS along with the Office of Human Resources, the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, and Access Interpreting Services presented a workshop providing practical strategies for effective two-way communication.

Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

EDI will provide training for your group to increase understanding of working with individuals who have a disability. A seminar on working with Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing individuals can be arranged by contacting:

EDI Training Team

edi.training@nih.gov

301-496-6301

APPENDIX C

External Resources for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard-of Hearing

Organization	Resource Location	Description
American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS): Entry Point	https://www.aaas.org/programs/entry-point	The program welcomes individuals with disabilities interested in STEM but does not provide sponsorship. Sponsorship is the responsibility of the employing institution. For inquiries, please email entrypoint@aaas.org .
American Association of People With Disabilities (AAPD)	http://www.aapd.com/what-we-do/employment/internship-program	Internship coalition: AAPD offers accessible housing, a living stipend, and travel to and from Washington, DC, for all summer interns.
Emerging Leaders	https://www.viscardicenter.org/employment-placement-services/	Program offers services to help navigate the job search.
Employer Assistance and Resource Network (EARN)	https://askearn.org/	The website serves as a starting point for employers interested in hiring individuals who are D/HH.
Gallaudet University, Office for Career Success	https://gallaudet.edu/career-success/	The Gallaudet University Career Success Center provides comprehensive resources and support for students and alumni, including career counseling, job search assistance, resume and interview preparation, internship opportunities, and connections to employers committed to hiring individuals who are D/HH.
Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA)	http://www.hearingloss.org/ https://www.hearingloss.org/hearing-help/financial-assistance/	Does not offer sponsorship for trainee stipends but provides support for equipment for low-income families and children. Additionally, offers referrals to other resources.
Job Accommodation Network	https://askjan.org/info-by-role.cfm#for-employers	Navigate to "A to Z," then select "Hearing Impairment" to access a list of software and accommodation ideas tailored for individuals who are D/HH.
Maryland: Governor's Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing	https://oD/HH.maryland.gov/	Provides resources and support, including access to information about assistive technology, communication access, employment resources, and advocacy initiatives.
Office of Disability Employment Policy Workforce Reinvestment Program (WRP)	https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/resources	Connects federal and private sector employers with college students and recent graduates with disabilities.
The Optimist Club	https://www.optimist.org/member/membersmenu.cfm	Offers assistance and support to youth with hearing impairments. While they do not provide funding for training, they offer specialized sponsorship opportunities and targeted programs.

APPENDIX D

Compilation of Web Links Referenced in the Guide

- NIH Office of Research Services (ORS): <https://ors.od.nih.gov/Pages/home.aspx>; manages the Interpreting Services: <https://ors.od.nih.gov/pes/emb/interpret/Pages/default.aspx>
- NIH Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI): <https://www.edi.nih.gov/>
- Request reasonable accommodations through the NIH Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI): <https://www.edi.nih.gov/consulting/reasonable-accommodation/about>
- Request training at EDI: <https://www.edi.nih.gov/training/about>
- Examples of lab compacts from the NIH Office of Intramural Research (OIR): https://oir.nih.gov/system/files/media/file/2021-08/lab_compact_examples.pdf
- Request Video Relay Service (VRS): <https://video.nih.gov/usability/VRS.asp>
- List of NIH Training Directors: <https://www.training.nih.gov/ic-td/>
- Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE) website: <https://www.training.nih.gov/>
- Article on the importance of having interpreters who understand one's scientific vocabulary: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00705-5>
- Best practices for an inclusive and welcoming conference: <https://contribute.cncf.io/accessibility/deaf-and-hard-of-hearing/conference-best-practices/>
- NCI Deaf Student Training Program (DSTP): <https://ccr.cancer.gov/laboratory-of-cancer-biology-and-genetics/lcbg-deaf-scientist-opportunities>
- NIH Research Campus Locations: <https://irp.nih.gov/about-us/research-campus-locations>
- Set up a user profile to start entering requests in the Access Interpreting (usked.com) portal: <https://access.usked.com/>

- Download the free uSked mobile app to iOS and Android devices: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/usked/id1129305211>
- American Sign Language website: <https://www.signasl.org/>
- Information on Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) from the Federal Communications Commission: <https://www.fcc.gov/trs>