

# Deaf Americans are urging the White House to use sign language interpreters at coronavirus briefings

By Jessica Campisi, CNN

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**(CNN)**The US Census Bureau [estimates](#) that about 11.5 million Americans have some degree of hearing loss. Yet months into the coronavirus pandemic, the White House still does not have American Sign Language interpreters at its televised public health press briefings.

Many in the Deaf community say they are growing wary of not having important information disseminated to them through qualified sign language interpreters. "I'm sad, angry and frustrated for myself and my community," Melissa "echo" Greenlee, founder and CEO of [deaffriendly.com](#), a consumer review platform for the deaf and hard of hearing community, told CNN in an email. "I'm so tired of being left out and the last to know anything."

As the pandemic continues to upend daily life, Greenlee, and several deaf advocacy groups, are fighting to have interpreters at these briefings so they, too, can get important updates about the rapidly changing developments in the coronavirus fight. After receiving "daily complaints," the National Association of the Deaf -- the largest deaf advocacy group in the US -- and the National Council on Disability (NCD) sent letters to then-White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham urging the White House coronavirus task force to use American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters during its daily briefings.

"There is no doubt that the coronavirus brings with it significant added concerns for people with disabilities," NCD Chairman Neil Romano [wrote](#) in the letter, which was sent on March 18.

The NCD said its letter spoke for itself and declined to elaborate further, and the NAD did not respond to a request for comment. The White House did not provide a comment to CNN on whether it had received the letters or whether it would consider using an interpreter.

## 'Daily complaints'

The Trump administration has used interpreters in past public health briefings, including [before](#) and [in the aftermath](#) of Hurricanes Irma and Harvey.

Now, deaf advocates say, ASL interpreters are needed more than ever. Since January, the novel coronavirus has spread to every state and territory. As of Wednesday night, there are more than 846,000 cases in the US, with at least 46,000 reported deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University.

"During a pandemic especially, it's risky and senseless to not provide information to everyone," Greenlee, who is deaf, told CNN. "If the deaf community is without the information they need -- such as social distancing orders, stay at home orders, hygiene orders and mask wearing orders -- those very people become a risk to themselves and the community they live in."

In his letter, National Association for the Deaf CEO Howard Rosenblum said his organization has received "daily complaints from deaf and hard of hearing citizens across the country asking why their President is not ensuring they are getting the same access to emergency information as everyone else."

Celebrities, such as Marlee Matlin, have reiterated those requests, stressing the importance of having interpreters during Covid-19.

"Dear @WhiteHouse news & press conferences around the country during this Corona Virus Emergency have sign language interpreters standing next to the speakers, providing ACCESS for millions of deaf Americans," Matlin, an Academy Award winning actress and activist who is deaf, [tweeted](#). "Can you do the same, PLEASE?"

Governors across several states -- including New Jersey, California and Maryland -- already include ASL interpreters beside them while addressing their constituents during the pandemic.

Their efforts haven't gone unnoticed.

"The Deaf community has overwhelmingly given positive feedback directly to me through social media, email, video calls, and text messages," Rupert Dubler, a certified deaf interpreter who has served alongside Republican Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker during his daily coronavirus updates, told CNN in an email interview.

"I have heard again and again about how community members didn't realize the severity of this pandemic until they watched us at work and adjusted their plans accordingly."

Many nations -- including Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia -- have also used interpreters during televised news conferences with top public officials.

### **ASL interpreters vs. closed captioning**

While the White House doesn't currently use an interpreter during its coronavirus briefings, it does include closed captioning -- which displays the audio portion of a video as words on a screen.

The closed captioning is used in daily livestreams of the coronavirus task force updates, as well as on videos of past briefings uploaded to YouTube. It's also legally required for broadcasters, cable networks and other programmers that play the briefings on air to include closed captioning both on TV and on web streams to make programming more accessible to viewers.

Some Americans who are deaf and hard of hearing certainly use closed captioning to stay informed. But, Dubler said based on feedback he's received, there are members of the deaf community who feel closed captioning can be inaccurate, difficult to follow or "inaccessible."

With closed captioning, "even if the accuracy rate is 100% (which it rarely is), there is still plenty of information missing or wrong," Greenlee echoed.

Both Greenlee and Rupert said that conveying tone can also be lost in written captions, while an interpreter's facial expressions, sign choice and demeanor can add context and comfort to a message -- especially during a public health crisis.

"Our interpretation strives to capture the genuine emotion of the governor when he reflects on those lives lost. This display of empathy that they now have access to makes many community members understand better the Governor's decisions that are having an enormous impact on their lives," Dubler told CNN. "We absolutely cannot leave anybody behind in this work."