

Good afternoon Chair Hardy,

I am Deb Charlea Baker, the chair of the Accessibility Committee of the Governor's Advisory Council for D/HH/DB. I am also a member of the Hearing Loss Association of America and the chair of the Vermont Chapter. Thank you for inviting me to discuss this important issue.

The lack of consistent reliable communication accessibility for public announcements is not a new problem. For months and years, Hard of Hearing, Deaf and DeafBlind constituents have complained and raised concerns to the Governor's office, various departments and agencies and local television stations about this lack of access. Complaints have been rebuffed, ignored or referred to somewhere else. To date none of us has been able to figure out where the "buck" stops. No person or department has been willing to take the responsibility to ensure that official, emergency or disaster information is made accessible to the over 70,000 Vermonters with hearing loss.

When the storm of July 11, 2023 happened the Governor and Emergency Management were quick to respond to the emergency with televised press announcements that conveyed vital warnings and important information for help and assistance. But this timely and potentially life saving information was completely and utterly inaccessible to Hard of Hearing, Deaf and DeafBlind Vermonters. In a very real sense this information was withheld from these two communities.

To this day, the Governor's public announcements which are routinely streamed on the internet are not captioned ever, and only rarely is an interpreter available. This is in violation of the ADA. It has real and potentially dire consequences for real people. This is why the Governor's D/HH/DB Advisory Council established a subcommittee on emergency accessibility.

I want to tell you about one late deafened Vermonter. Tony Asch has kindly given me permission to share his experience with the storm and its aftermath. Tony is an 89 year old Korean War Veteran who has a home far up a back road in Dummerston. He wears powerful hearing aids, and uses an FM listening system for the television, but finds he relies on captioning more and more. He got a smart phone a couple of years ago, but does not use a computer. His media consumption is primarily captioned TV and reading news on his smartphone. Like the vast majority of people who acquire hearing loss or deafness later in life, Tony does not know sign language.

When the July storm hit Tony watched the weather reports which were only sporadically and poorly captioned. But when the Governor and officials were on the TV there was no captioning at all. He tried hearing them but could not understand what they were saying and stopped watching altogether. The storm seriously damaged the bridge leading to his house and needed urgent repairs. Without that bridge he would be unable to get to his house due to his mobility limitations. If he were to become ill or hurt, the ambulance could not reach him. He is on social security and a small pension so the expense of bridge repair was simply out of his reach. He was not aware that help was available. This caused him extreme worry and stress for weeks.

A friend happened to see a blurb in the weekly shopper newspaper about the local FEMA office closing in a few days. Told Tony about it and brought him to meet with them. He qualified and received thousands of dollars to get his bridge repaired and restored his ability to safely travel to and from his home. By sheer luck and by the skin of his teeth he got the assistance he so desperately needed.

Simply put. All the information the Governor, Emergency management and FEMA “shared” was not shared with this older late deafened veteran. How many other Hard of Hearing, Deaf and DeafBlind Vermonters were not as fortunate as Tony? How many of them missed out on opportunities for help, were endangered or unnecessarily suffered by not having access to information?

When the state has a duty to inform the public, it means ALL of the public, not just the hearing public or the able bodied public. Hard of Hearing, Deaf and DeafBlind Vermonters are entitled to be included in the information that can keep them safe, whole and informed.

This communication accessibility problem has dragged on for far too long. It is only a matter of time before the people of our state will face another emergency related disaster. We urge our Legislators to finally address and resolve this issue so that Hard of Hearing, Deaf and DeafBlind Vermonters will not be shut out and again be put at risk.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Deb Charlea Baker

Governor’s Advisory Council for D/HH/DB, Accessibility Committee Chair

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