

# IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES FOR CLIENTS WHO ARE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING

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## INTRODUCTION

Over 1.4 million Deaf or Hard of Hearing (D/HH) people live in Massachusetts, yet most health care settings have limited accessible resources.<sup>1</sup> D/HH and DeafBlind (DB) people encounter significant barriers to accessing mental health services including:

- Communication (primarily spoken and textual English)
- Clinicians inexperienced with this population
- Lack of American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter services
- History of exclusion and mistreatment by the medical field

In 2021, with support from a Community Mental Health Center (CMHC) grant, the Freedom Trail Clinic (FTC) expanded accessibility to services for D/HH clients.



1 in 5 Massachusetts residents considers themselves Deaf or Hard of Hearing<sup>1</sup>

## METHODS

- North Suffolk streamlined the referral process for D/HH clients seeking services. Intakes are conducted by a Deaf clinician or with an ASL/English interpreter as needed
- Staff have been trained on communication strategies for D/HH clients, including some basic ASL signs and written tools
- Medication evaluations have been supported by FTC's Care Navigator and a dedicated D/HH intake slot
- Extended interpreter hours for initial and follow-up medication appointments, Care Navigator services, and other services as needed
- FTC has adapted clinic materials such as paperwork, signage, and flyers to be more visual and ASL friendly
- FTC is working on producing educational videos on different mental health topics featuring someone signing in ASL, with English subtitles and voice overlay
- Six FTC staff attended a "Deaf and Hard of Hearing Experiences in Healthcare" summit hosted by 2axend, a D/HH advocacy group

## METHODS CONT.

- FTC began offering group counseling provided entirely in ASL by a FTC clinician who is Deaf. Topics have included general mental health counseling, bipolar, depression, anxiety, and dual-diagnosis support. Groups are offered in person at FTC with a hybrid option.



The American Sign Language alphabet.

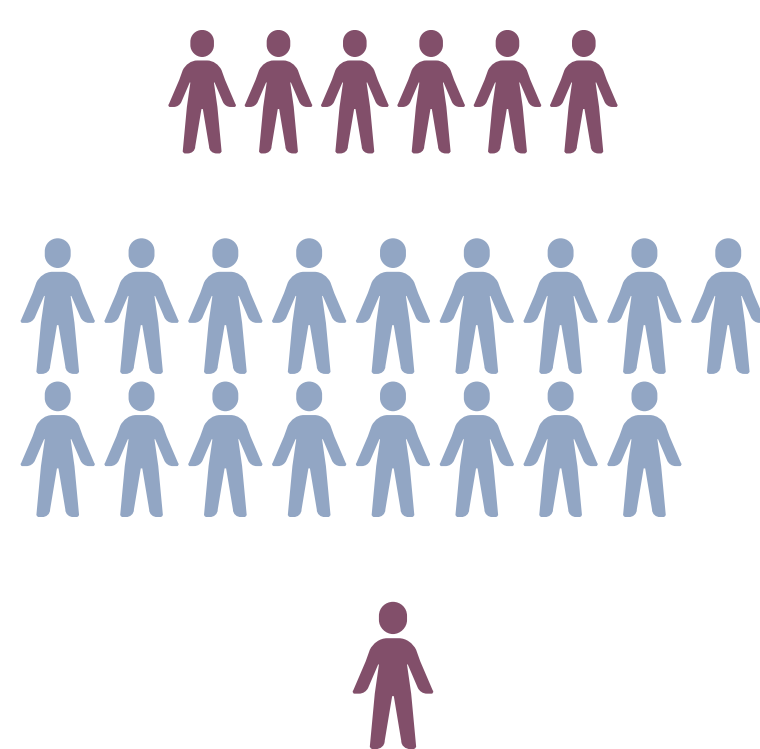
## Welcome to Freedom Trail

Please circle "yes" or "no" to answer the following check-in questions. Thank you!

1. What is your name?
2. Are you experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms today? **YES** or **NO**
3. Has any of your personal information changed since you were last here? For example: address, phone number, insurance, etc. **YES** or **NO**
4. Is there anything else you would like us to know right now? **Please write in the space below:**

The above sheet can be used when a patient checks in at the clinic. A laminated copy is kept at the front desk and can be written on with a dry erase marker. The back side of the sheet includes a full list of providers so that patients can indicate who they are there to see.

Despite having one of the highest concentrations of mental health providers in the country, Massachusetts has<sup>2,3</sup>:



6 Deaf therapists

17 hearing therapists who consider themselves ASL "fluent" or "proficient"

1 Deaf psychiatrist

## OUTCOMES

These improvements in communication and expanded interpreter availability have resulted in a smoother, more accessible experience for D/HH clients during visits to FTC.

The addition of support groups in ASL has resulted in greater retention and sustained participation of D/HH clients.

## DISCUSSION

There is a pressing need to educate hearing clinicians and other staff on D/HH communication strategies, and improve interpreter accessibility in all health care settings. Ideally, there would be more mental health care providers who are D/HH themselves, especially given the importance of peer support and lived experience in mental health settings. However, barriers persist, and without accessible education and licensing exams, D/HH people are too often prevented from filling these roles.

## References:

1. Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, 2023. <https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-commission-for-the-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing>
2. Center for Living and Working, 2021. <https://www.centerlw.org/services/deaf-hard-of-hearing/>
3. United Way, 2020. <https://unitedwayna.org/blog/mental-healthcare-access-by-state/>