

What Is the ADA?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal civil rights law passed in 1990 that protects people with disabilities — including Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals — from discrimination.

It requires that people with disabilities have equal access to:

- Jobs
- Government services
- Public places
- Communication
- Education
- Technology

ADA Timeline: How It Happened

1970s–1980s: Activism Grows

- Disability rights groups began to protest, organize, and demand access to public life.
- Deaf people joined in to demand access to communication, interpreters, and captioning.

1988: Deaf President Now (DPN) Movement

- The success of the DPN protest at Gallaudet University helped show the power and voice of the Deaf community.
- It increased public support for Deaf civil rights and influenced lawmakers.

1990: ADA Becomes Law

- Signed into law by President George H. W. Bush on July 26, 1990.
- It was one of the most important disability rights laws in U.S. history.

How Does the ADA Protect Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People?

The ADA includes several parts ("titles") that require communication access and equal treatment for Deaf people in many areas of life.

Title I – Employment

- Employers cannot discriminate against a qualified Deaf person.
- Employers must provide reasonable accommodations, like:
 - Sign language interpreters
 - Captioned training videos
 - Written instructions

Title II – Government Services

- State and local governments must make programs accessible.
- Examples:
 - Courts must provide interpreters.
 - City meetings should offer captioning or ASL if requested.
 - Police and emergency services must know how to communicate clearly with Deaf citizens.

Title III – Public Places

- Places open to the public must provide equal access.
 - Restaurants, hospitals, hotels, museums, theaters, schools, etc.
- Examples of access for Deaf people:
 - Sign language interpreters in hospitals or clinics

- Closed captioning on TVs in waiting rooms
- Visual alert systems (like flashing fire alarms)

What Is “Effective Communication”?

This is a key phrase in the ADA. It means that Deaf and hard-of-hearing people must be given equal access to communication.

Depending on the situation, this might mean:

- ASL interpreters
- Real-time captioning (CART)
- Video relay services (VRS)
- Speech-to-text apps
- Written materials or note-takers

The Deaf person’s preferred method of communication must be respected — not just what is easiest or cheapest for the business or provider.

Real-Life Examples

- A Deaf patient at a hospital has the right to an ASL interpreter, not just written notes.
- A job interview should offer captioning or interpreting if the applicant requests it.
- A college must ensure lectures are interpreted or captioned for Deaf students.
- Police must provide an interpreter if a Deaf person is being questioned or arrested.

Why Is the ADA So Important to the Deaf Community?

- It legally protects Deaf people’s right to access communication
- It helps stop discrimination in jobs, schools, and services
- It supports Deaf autonomy and equality
- It makes communication barriers illegal, not just inconvenient
- It encourages society to include Deaf people — not ignore them

Limitations and Ongoing Challenges

Although the ADA is powerful, challenges remain:

- Not all organizations follow the law (some are unaware or try to avoid it).
- Deaf people still face denied requests for interpreters.
- Emergency systems, like 911, often lack proper Deaf access.
- Technology access (like auto-captioning) can still be inaccurate or incomplete.

This is why continued advocacy and education are needed — and why many Deaf people continue to fight for full equality.

Summary Chart

Area	ADA Protection for Deaf People
Employment	Interpreters, captioning, accessible hiring
Government	Access to courts, public events, emergency services
Public Places	Interpreters in hospitals, captioned videos, visual alarms
Education	Equal access to instruction and communication
Effective Communication	Based on the person's needs, not convenience