

Letter to the Editor

September is Deaf Awareness Month

Sep 25, 2025



Editor:

Deaf Awareness Month is observed each September and celebrates the history, language and culture of the Deaf community in America. You have most likely encountered Deaf people conversing in American Sign Language (ASL) in stores and restaurants, on the beach and at public events. The Deaf and hard-of-hearing community includes all ages, from newly-diagnosed infants and Deaf and hard-of-hearing school children in the Indian River School District, young Deaf professionals, to Deaf and hard-of-hearing retired senior citizens.

Although the Deaf population in our area has grown exponentially in the past few decades, there has always been a Deaf community on Delmarva. Local Deaf residents recall that they and the generation before them traveled across the Chesapeake Bay by ferry boat before the Bay Bridge was built in 1952. Many of these early Deaf residents were drawn to the sense of community they could find here among other Deaf people.

Newer residents today are similarly drawn to the “critical mass” of Deaf people on Delmarva when they consider purchasing homes here. There are regular social gatherings at local restaurants, such as the Deaf men’s breakfast and the Deaf ladies’ luncheon. There are holiday dinners, picnics, pickleball tournaments, and biking, kayaking and bowling groups. There is never a dull moment with Deaf senior citizens!

If a venue offers access, such as ASL interpreters or open captioning at movie theaters, or consistently has captioning on the TVs in restaurants, Deaf people will frequent those businesses. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed in 1990, the hearing community still

needs to be reminded of their obligations to provide equitable access.

In 2015, recognizing the need for a formal organization of Deaf senior citizens, Mike Childs and Denis Munn established the Delaware Deaf Senior Citizens (DDSC), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. DDSC thrives today, with over 200 members. DDSC's mission is to enhance the well-being of Deaf and hard-of-hearing senior citizens, improve communication access, and increase awareness about the Deaf community and American Sign Language. Through fundraising activities, DDSC provides scholarships to Delaware's Deaf and hard-of-hearing students and donations of books on Deaf culture to local libraries. DDSC will celebrate its 10-year anniversary in October. Their website is <http://delawaredeafsc.org>.

Abundant resources about Deaf culture and local resources can be found online, including ASL courses and videos. The Sussex County library system has a collection of books on Deaf people and the Deaf community for adults and children. Salisbury University offers a Deaf Studies minor for undergraduates and is in the planning stage of offering an ASL interpreting program. Sussex Central High School now offers ASL classes as a foreign language option and has an extra-curricular ASL Club. Del Tech Community College offers American Sign Language classes to the community.

The Delaware Association of the Deaf (DAD) is a state-wide organization that provides information and resources, <http://delawaredeaf.org>. The Delaware Office for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing within the Delaware Department of Labor can also provide information and referral, <http://labor.delaware.gov>.

September is Deaf Awareness Month. While the Deaf community still struggles for equitable communication access to medical care, entertainment venues and public events, there are local businesses and service providers that should be highlighted during Deaf Awareness Month.

The Clayton Theater in Dagsboro has offered open captioned films since 2018. The theater's owner, Joanne Howe, was aware that Deaf and hard-of-hearing people prefer that open captions appear on the screen (similar to subtitles) rather than using cumbersome devices to watch movies on the big screen. The Clayton shows an open-captioned matinee for each movie offered. Captions also benefit young children who are learning to read, as well as those who are learning English as a second language.

Aquacare Physical Therapy in Millville employs an ASL-fluent physical therapist, Lauren Nuttle, who herself is hard-of-hearing. Lauren is the "go to" physical therapist in the Deaf community since she can easily communicate in ASL without an interpreter.

Another local business is ASL Connections, a Deaf-owned interpreting referral business. Co-owners Suz Dennis and Bonnie Goben are seeing a surge of requests for ASL interpreters in the area as service providers and businesses are realizing the growth of the Deaf community, especially Deaf retirees.

Beebe Healthcare is actively pursuing how to remove communication barriers to the Deaf community. Deaf consumers can request an ASL interpreter in advance for appointments and can also utilize the technology available with an interpreter remotely on a laptop. This system is called “video remote interpreting.” Beebe has a Deaf person on their Patient & Family Advisory Council who provides feedback on communication access.

Ocean View Brewing Company has hired a Deaf head chef, Maggie Williamson. The SoDel Concepts restaurant in Ocean View recently offered a beer pairing and appetizer event to honor Deaf Awareness Month. Chef Maggie led the event in American Sign Language. She will be offering more events for Oktoberfest.

The South Coastal Library, as well as some local businesses have had staff take online ASL classes to become more accessible to Deaf people. If your business has offered similar approaches to accessibility, please let us know. The Delaware Deaf Senior Citizens are assembling a list of “Deaf-friendly” businesses. Hopefully, the 2026 Deaf Awareness month will have a much longer list.

Barbara White

Ocean View