



# The Criminal Justice Institute's Management Quarterly

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## Talking Hands: Non-Verbal Communication for Arkansas Law Enforcement



**A**ccording to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 636 law enforcement officers were killed between 1995 and 2004. Twenty-six percent (26%) occurred in arrest situations; 18% were the result of ambush; 16% occurred during response to disturbance calls; 16% occurred during traffic pursuits/stops; 13% occurred while investigating suspicious persons/circumstances; and 10% were contributed to other situations. To reduce the number of deaths and injuries, many law enforcement agencies are looking for additional tools to protect their officers in the line of duty.

Talking Hands is one such tool. Using one-handed signals, officers have the ability to communicate with each other non-verbally in volatile environments, effectively preventing suspects from hearing critical law enforcement information.

### History

In 1986, law enforcement officers shot and killed two deaf men in California. In response, California mandated training for all police recruits to teach them to appropriately respond to the hearing impaired.

Suzanne Cromlish of Nashville, Tennessee, was a natural choice to provide this training. Cromlish, who began her career of interpreting for the hearing impaired at the age of 15, had interpreted for such dignitaries as Bill Clinton,

George Bush, Dan Quayle, Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter, and many governors and senators. Since she had also interpreted for the California governor and attorney general, the San Francisco Police Academy requested her assistance in developing this training for their department.

After three years of participating in ride-a-longs to learn more about police officers and the police environment, Cromlish noticed that officers were verbalizing everything in the presence of suspects and had no method of communicating with each other in noisy situations. It was at this time that Talking Hands emerged.

By utilizing components of American Sign Language, Cromlish was able to teach officers easy, one-handed signals they could use to communicate entire sentences with one quick motion. Initially, many signals required testing and modification, but once they were put to use, they proved to be effective in the field.

## Taking it to the Streets

While officers can use Talking Hands in many settings, there are three primary settings where it has been particularly effective—**traffic stops, large crowds, and building searches.**

### 1.) Traffic Stops

Traffic stops are too often the scene of tragedy for law enforcement officers across the country. As indicated earlier, more than 100 officers died in 1994 during traffic stops and vehicle pursuits.

During the critical “fight or flight” time that can occur during a traffic stop, an officer may use Talking Hands to communicate critical information to his partner or back-up. Because officers do not have to verbalize sensitive information, the threat to officers is reduced. For example, instead of verbally saying, “There is contraband in the car,” officers trained in Talking Hands can communicate this type of information non-verbally, allowing officers to respond appropriately without raising the suspicion of occupants in the vehicle.

### 2.) Large Crowds

Officers are often called upon to perform crowd control duties at large venues, such as concerts, state fairs, and sporting events. In these cases, officers are often in eyesight of one another but not in hearing range. Having the ability to communicate with Talking Hands techniques could save officers time in responding to critical situations as they occur.

### 3.) Building Searches

Oftentimes, officers must perform building searches in an effort to locate suspects and/or dangerous materials or to respond to a crime as it takes place. These situations are extremely dangerous and warrant extra caution from responding officers. Talking Hands teaches the officers how to communicate in these situations without alerting possible suspects that they are in the area.

## Getting Started

Some officers may feel intimidated about using sign language due to what they perceive as a complicated system of hand signals. The signs used in the Talking Hands system are actually very simple and easy to learn.



It is subject to an officer’s discretion whether it is best to use non-verbal or verbal communication with other officers. In some cases, it may be better to verbally state, “He has a gun,” rather than try to convey this information non-verbally. With Talking Hands, officers can choose which technique they will use depending on the situation.

As with any training in a specific field, officers must continue to practice their new skills to maintain proficiency.

They are encouraged to practice with fellow officers and encourage those who don’t have the training to attend a course.

A course on Talking Hands is now available through the Criminal Justice Institute. As part of the course, students will also not only learn single-hand sign language, but will demonstrate the use of these hand signals through practical exercises, scenarios, and final assessment. The skills taught in this course are invaluable to the officers patrolling the streets and highways of our cities, counties, and state. They have practical application for the uniformed officer, the drug enforcement officer, the detective, and the SWAT team member.

A CJI course on Talking Hands will be offered at the following times and locations:

October 3, 2006  
Criminal Justice Institute

January 4, 2007  
Criminal Justice Institute

# Policy and Procedures:

## Serving the Deaf in Your Community

**O**n occasion, your officers and personnel will come in contact with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits State and local government from discriminating against any individual with a disability, including those individuals with hearing impairments. To ensure compliance with this Federal law, your agency should adopt a detailed policy regarding communication with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and you should ensure that everyone within your agency is familiar with this policy.

The U.S. Department of Justice provides the following guidelines for interacting with people who are deaf or hard of hearing:

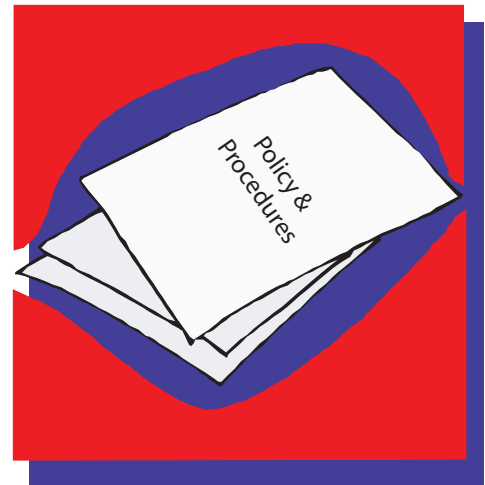
**What does Title II require of you when interacting with persons who are deaf or hard of hearing?** Your communication with such an individual must be as effective as your communication with hearing people.

**How do you communicate?** Provide aids or services as necessary to ensure that the deaf or hard of hearing individual understands what you are saying and that you understand him or her. These can include:

- use of qualified sign language or oral interpreters
- for people who are hard of hearing, speaking loudly and clearly, and use of assistive listening devices (to amplify sound)
- use of supplemental gestures or visual aids
- an exchange of written notes
- or use of a computer or typewriter.

**What method of communication should you use?**

The law requires you to give primary consideration to the individual's preference. Ask how the person wishes to communicate. For example, some people who are deaf do not use sign language and may need to use a different aid or rely on lip reading. In one-on-one communication with an individual who lip reads, an officer should face the individual directly and should ensure that the communication takes place in a well-lighted area.



Honor the individual's choice unless it would significantly interfere with your law enforcement responsibilities or you are confident that other means of communicating, that may be easier to provide, are just as effective. Remember that deaf or hard of hearing persons must be able to understand you as well as those who do not have hearing impairments.

DO NOT ask a family member or friend to interpret for a deaf individual unless it is urgent to communicate immediately and that is the only option. If the deaf person requests that arrangement and the other person agrees, however, you can proceed.

**How do you know when you are communicating clearly to an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing?** Ask the person to summarize what you are saying. Test his or her understanding.

**If the person uses sign language, what kinds of communication require an interpreter?** Consider the length, importance, and complexity of the communication, as well as the context.

- In a simple encounter, such as checking a driver's license or giving directions, a notepad and pencil or perhaps gestures will normally be sufficient.
- During interrogations and arrests, a sign language interpreter will often be necessary. Make sure that you have contact information for sign language interpreters in your area.
- If the legality of a conversation will be questioned in court, such as where Miranda warnings

- are issued, an interpreter may be necessary. You should be careful about misunderstandings in the absence of a qualified interpreter. A nod of the head may be an attempt to appear cooperative in the midst of misunderstanding, rather than consent or a confession of wrongdoing.
- In general, if an individual who does not have a hearing disability would be subject to police action without interrogation, then an interpreter will not be required, unless one is necessary to explain the action being taken.

**Example:** An officer clocks a car on the highway driving 15 miles above the speed limit. The driver, who is deaf, is pulled over and issued a non-criminal citation. The individual is able to understand the reasons for the citation, because the officer exchanges notes and points to information on the citation. A sign language interpreter is not needed.

**Example:** An officer responds to an aggravated battery call and upon arriving at the scene observes a bleeding victim and an individual holding a weap-

on. Eyewitnesses observed the individual strike the victim. The individual with the weapon is deaf, but the officer has probable cause to make a felony arrest without an interrogation. An interpreter is not necessary to carry out the arrest.

**Example:** An officer responds to the scene of a domestic disturbance. The husband says the wife has been beating their children and he has been trying to restrain her. The wife, who is deaf, requests an interpreter. The officer begins by exchanging notes but the woman's responses indicate a lack of comprehension and poor grammar. An interpreter is necessary to carry out any arrest. In this situation, it would be inappropriate to use a family member to assist with communication, even if it is offered.

**Do you have to take a sign language interpreter to a call about a violent crime in progress or a similar urgent situation involving a person who is deaf?** No. An officer's immediate priority is to stabilize the situation. If the person being arrested is deaf, the officer can make an arrest and call for an interpreter to be available later at the booking station.



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