

AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION  
2020 MIDWINTER MEETING  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

FRIDAY, JANUARY 24, 2020  
11:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.  
DEAF CULTURE FORUM

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## **Outreach to the Deaf in Prison**

>> MOLLY RAPHAEL: Thank you. Now, Reverend Ron Friedrich. Pastor to the deaf in prison.

>> RON FRIEDRICH: I cannot emphasize and overstate what Melissa shared about the value of prison libraries particularly for men and women who are incarcerated. Thank you. Sadly, most prison systems do not have protocols in place to identify those who are deaf and hard of hearing within their institutions. Like many in societies, it's like we don't have any deaf here. And so consequently, they do not provide resources necessary for deaf people to function equitably in a hearing society. It is no exaggeration to observe that generally deaf people in prisons serve longer time incarcerated than their hearing peers simply because they do not have interpreter access to programs which would normally lessen their time served.

Deaf people in prison routinely miss meals because they didn't hear chow call, and nobody thought to stop by to alert them. It is not unusual for a deaf inmate to be written up for violations, sent to solitary confinement for two weeks simply because he failed to respond to a verbal command from an officer

standing behind him. As one inmate told me, we are punished twice, once for the crimes we have committed, and we are punished again simply because we are deaf.

Most prison systems purposefully separate deaf inmates housing them in separate institutions because administrators fear that deaf people will use their secret language to perpetrate gang activities. Fortunately, there are some exceptions to this pattern. I can only count five states that have programs in place where they proactively seek to house deaf inmates in a central facility where they can provide coordinated services, access to rehabilitative programs, and opportunities to communicate with friends and family on the outside. Most people, deaf people, the majority of them handle English as a foreign language which they have never heard. And in prison we see deaf inmates who run the full gamut from those who are highly literate to those whose command of the English language does not make sense out of any text.

When those of the latter group go to the library to seek information or resources, they like to take a friend along. Somebody with whom they can communicate who will help them find what they seek and translate it for them in sign. In many prisons that sort of mutual help is not allowed because, again, administrators fear that a friend helping a friend is a cover for gang activity. Well so, the kind of resources that we have been talking about it goes without saying are not found in prison libraries. One group of very hard of hearing men who are desperate to learn sign, in learning that I would not be able to meet with them to because I'm in a room full of librarians, gave me this message to convey to you.

They said in our library the only resources that we have that come close to dealing with the life issues we face are two copies of Signing for Dummies. This particular library does not accept gifts, can only requisition new titles. The institution does not allow them to take donations from the outside, and, of course, in any prison system shelf space is the challenge. I'm convinced that there must be a special place in heaven for prison libraries considering the conditions under which they have to work. I commend to your reading a report by the American Civil Liberties Union done a couple of years ago. I should have given you a slide to put it up. It deals with the conditions and life of people with disabilities behind bars. It's easy, accessible download, just enter in your favorite search program, "ACLU Caged In." Mr. Taylor who is with us today had some very important input to the report on this and I commend it to your reading at the end of today's program, Mr. Taylor and I will stick around and we will welcome further conversation. Thank you.

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