

NVRC Policy Watch 2026

Laws, Policies, and Decisions Affecting the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community

Policies affecting our community are not limited to new laws. They also include government budgets, regulations, agency decisions, funding priorities, and how existing protections are implemented.

This guide highlights important federal, state, and local policy issues and explains how they may affect Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind, DeafPlus, and DeafDisabled individuals, families, and allies.

A Note About Politics and Policy

Disability rights are not the work of one political party or one administration. They are civil rights protections built over decades through the advocacy, persistence, and lived experiences of people with disabilities and their allies.

The laws themselves establish important protections, but the way those protections affect people's daily lives can change over time based on government priorities, enforcement decisions, regulations, funding, and implementation.

Staying informed helps our community understand what is changing, participate in important conversations, and continue advocating for a more accessible and inclusive future.

FEDERAL LAWS & PROTECTIONS

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Passed: 1990

Type: Federal Civil Rights Law

What is it?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects people with disabilities from discrimination in:

- Employment
- State and local government services
- Public accommodations
- Transportation
- Communication access

Did the ADA go away?

No. The ADA remains federal law.

The ADA was passed by Congress and signed into law in 1990. A presidential administration cannot simply eliminate the ADA.

However, administrations can influence:

- enforcement priorities,
- regulations,
- agency guidance,
- funding priorities,
- implementation.

How does the ADA affect Deaf and Hard of Hearing people?

The ADA requires effective communication.

Depending on the situation, this may include:

- ASL interpreters
- CART captioning
- Captioning
- Assistive listening technology
- Other communication solutions

Does the ADA guarantee an interpreter?

Not always.

The ADA does not require one specific accommodation in every situation. The appropriate solution depends on:

- the individual,
- the setting,
- the complexity of the communication.

The goal is effective communication and equal participation.

Current Policy Discussion

The ADA remains a strong civil rights protection, but how protections are implemented can change over time.

Current policy discussions include:

- How agencies interpret and enforce protections
- How guidance is developed and applied
- How communities ensure effective communication remains accessible

The law remains in place, but staying informed helps our community understand how protections affect daily life.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Passed: 1973

Type: Federal Civil Rights Protection

What is it?

Section 504 protects people with disabilities from discrimination in programs and organizations receiving federal financial assistance.

Where does it apply?

Examples include:

- Hospitals
- Schools
- Colleges and universities
- Government programs
- Many nonprofit organizations

Why does it matter?

Section 504 works alongside the ADA to help ensure people with disabilities have equal access to federally funded programs and services.

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, it supports communication access in federally funded programs.

Current Policy Discussion

Section 504 remains an important protection for people with disabilities, but how protections are implemented can change over time.

Current policy discussions include:

- How federally funded programs meet accessibility requirements
- How agencies interpret and enforce disability protections
- How organizations ensure equal access to services

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, Section 504 continues to be an important protection for communication access and participation in federally funded programs.

Olmstead v. L.C. (1999)

Type: U.S. Supreme Court Decision

What is it?

Olmstead interpreted the ADA and recognized that people with disabilities have the right to receive services in the most integrated setting appropriate.

Why does it matter?

The decision supports:

- Independence
- Community participation
- Inclusion

Current Policy Discussion

Olmstead remains an important disability rights protection, but current policy discussions continue to raise questions about how disability rights laws are interpreted and enforced.

The law itself has not changed. However, changes in federal guidance, enforcement priorities, and legal interpretations can affect how protections are applied.

Why does this matter?

For people with disabilities, access means being able to participate where life happens — not being separated because of disability.

For the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, access to community-based services depends not only on what laws say, but also on how those laws are implemented.

Federal Employment Protections

What protects Deaf and Hard of Hearing employees?

Primary protections include:

ADA Title I (Employment)

Section 504 for federally funded employers/programs

What does this mean?

Employers cannot discriminate against qualified employees because of disability.

Employers may need to provide reasonable accommodations such as:

- Accessible training
- Captioning
- Interpreters
- Communication adjustments
- Technology solutions

Important reminder:

The ADA does not require employers to eliminate job expectations.

The question is whether a qualified employee can perform the essential functions of the job with reasonable accommodations.

VIRGINIA POLICY CHANGES

HB 602 – Open Captioning at Motion Picture Theaters

Effective: July 1, 2026

Type: Virginia Law

What changed?

Virginia requires covered movie theaters to provide regularly scheduled open-caption screenings.

What are open captions?

Open captions are captions displayed directly on the movie screen and visible to everyone.

Why does it matter?

For many Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, accessing movies has historically required requesting special equipment or accommodations.

Open captions create a more independent experience by making accessibility part of the environment.

Who benefits?

In addition to Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals:

- Older adults experiencing hearing loss
- People learning English
- People with auditory processing challenges
- People who prefer captions

VIRGINIA POLICY AREAS TO WATCH

Virginia Human Rights Act

Type: Virginia Civil Rights Law

What is it?

The Virginia Human Rights Act is a state law that protects individuals from discrimination in areas such as employment and public accommodations.

Why does it matter to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Virginians?

State-level protections work alongside federal protections such as the ADA.

These protections support equal opportunity and help address barriers related to:

- employment
- access to services
- participation in community life

Community Impact

Laws create protections, but meaningful access depends on:

- Awareness
 - Implementation
 - Enforcement
 - People knowing their rights
-

Employment Rights and Workplace Access

What protects Deaf and Hard of Hearing employees?

Primary protections include:

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title I

Virginia Human Rights Act

Section 504 (when applicable)

What does this mean?

Employers must provide qualified employees with equal opportunity and consider reasonable accommodations.

Examples may include:

- Captioned meetings and training
- Interpreters
- Accessible workplace communication
- Assistive technology
- Adjustments to workplace practices

Important reminder:

Disability does not mean a person cannot work.

The question under disability rights laws is whether a qualified individual can perform the essential functions of a job with reasonable accommodations.

Why does this matter?

As workplaces change — including more remote work, virtual meetings, and new technology — communication access continues to evolve.

Employment access is not only about getting a job. It is about being able to participate, contribute, and advance.

Healthcare Access

What policies protect healthcare communication access?

Healthcare access is influenced by:

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
- Other healthcare accessibility requirements

Why does it matter?

Communication access in healthcare affects:

- Understanding diagnoses
- Making informed decisions
- Medication instructions
- Treatment options
- Patient safety

What should individuals know?

People have the right to request communication access that allows them to participate effectively in their healthcare.

Possible accommodations may include:

- Qualified interpreter
- Captioning
- Accessible technology
- Other communication solutions

Community Impact

Healthcare continues to be one of the areas where NVRC hears significant concerns from Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals.

Access is not only about having information available — it is about making sure people can understand and participate.

Healthcare access is also a broader disability and aging issue affecting older adults, people with disabilities, and their families.

Current Policy Discussion

Healthcare access continues to be an important policy issue for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals.

Current discussions include:

- How healthcare providers meet communication access requirements
- How technology changes affect communication access
- How older adults and people with disabilities receive accessible healthcare information
- How systems ensure patients can fully participate in healthcare decisions
- How changes to Medicaid and other healthcare programs may affect access to services for older adults and people with disabilities

Communication access in healthcare is not only about providing information — it is about ensuring people can understand, participate, and make informed decisions.

Aging, Disability, and Community Services

Why is aging an important policy issue?

Hearing loss becomes increasingly common as people age, and aging affects many people with disabilities.

As Virginia's population ages, communities must consider how to support older adults experiencing hearing loss and other disabilities while promoting independence, connection, and access to services.

Policy areas to watch:

- Aging services
- Community-based supports
- Transportation
- Caregiver resources
- Social connection programs
- Technology access

Why does this matter?

Older adults may face barriers beyond hearing loss, including:

- Isolation
- Difficulty navigating services
- Limited technology experience
- Lack of awareness about available resources

Programs that build connection and provide information are important parts of supporting independence.

Current Policy Discussion

As the population ages, communities continue to examine how to support older adults and people with disabilities in remaining connected, independent, and engaged.

Current discussions include:

- Expanding access to community-based services
- Supporting older adults experiencing hearing loss
- Addressing social isolation
- Ensuring disability services include communication access
- Supporting caregivers and families

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, aging services must consider not only independence and support needs, but also communication access and connection to community.

Technology and Artificial Intelligence

Why is technology a policy issue?

Technology is rapidly changing how people communicate and access information.

Examples include:

- AI captioning
- Automated transcription
- Video communication platforms
- Digital services
- Online healthcare systems

Opportunities

Technology can create new opportunities for:

- Communication access
- Independence
- Information sharing

Questions we must continue asking:

- Is the technology accurate?
- Is it accessible?
- Does it protect privacy?
- Was accessibility considered from the beginning?

Community Impact

Technology can be a powerful tool, but it must be designed with the people who use it in mind.

Current Policy Discussion

Artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies are changing how people communicate and access information.

Current discussions include:

- The accuracy of AI-generated captions and transcripts
- Privacy and security of personal information
- Accessibility of digital services
- Whether people with disabilities are included in technology development

Technology can create new opportunities for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, but accessibility must be considered from the beginning.

Emergency Preparedness and Public Information

Why does this matter?

During emergencies, information must reach everyone.

Examples include:

- Emergency alerts
- Weather warnings
- Public health information
- Evacuation instructions
- Safety announcements

Policy questions:

Are emergency systems accessible through:

- Captioning?
- Visual alerts?
- Accessible websites?
- Multiple communication methods?

Community Impact

Emergency preparedness is not complete unless everyone can receive and understand critical information.

Local Government Policy Decisions

Local governments make many decisions that directly affect Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents.

While federal and state laws establish important protections, many services that affect daily life are shaped locally through:

- County and city budgets
- Human services programs
- Aging services
- Disability initiatives
- Transportation planning
- Housing programs
- Community partnerships
- Nonprofit funding decisions

Why does this matter?

A decision made during a local budget process can directly affect whether community members have access to programs, resources, and support.

Understanding local policy helps our community:

- Identify opportunities
- Build partnerships
- Advocate for needed services
- Participate in decisions that affect our lives

QUICK GUIDE: NVRC LOCAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONSHIPS

Fairfax County

Current NVRC partner and largest local government funder.

Arlington County

Current NVRC partner.

Loudoun County

Current NVRC partner.

Prince William County

Future opportunity for expanded services. Some funding opportunities require NVRC to have a physical presence within the county.

City of Fairfax

Not currently an NVRC partner. NVRC hopes to pursue a future partnership opportunity, including a potential RFP opportunity in the fall.

City of Alexandria

NVRC requested funding support but was not selected. NVRC remains committed to continued community engagement and advocacy.

Fairfax County

Speech & Hearing Program Closure

What was it?

The Fairfax County Speech & Hearing Program was a Fairfax County Health Department program providing speech, language, and hearing-related services to residents.

Important clarification:

The program was:

Not Fairfax County Public Schools

Not NVRC

It served residents across the lifespan, including:

- Children
- Adults
- Older adults

What changed?

Fairfax County ended the program after determining that similar services were available through other systems, including:

- Private providers
- Insurance-based services
- School-based services for eligible students

Why does this matter?

The closure raised important questions about access. A service may exist somewhere, but can every resident successfully access it?

Community members may face barriers related to:

- Cost
- Insurance coverage
- Transportation
- Awareness of available resources
- Understanding where to go for help

This issue reflects a broader policy conversation about whether available services are truly accessible to the people who need them.

Community Perspective

The need for hearing-related services has not disappeared.

As the population ages and more people experience hearing loss, communities must continue asking:

Are residents able to find the resources they need?

Are services accessible?

Are people connected to trusted sources of information and support?

Fairfax County Advisory Structure

Community representation is an important part of effective local policymaking.

Fairfax County has historically relied on advisory groups and community input to help identify needs and provide recommendations related to aging, disability, and human services.

Changes to advisory structures can affect how community members, advocates, and organizations provide input to decision-makers.

Fairfax County continues to provide opportunities for disability community input through advisory groups such as the Fairfax Area Disability Services Board, which helps identify needs and provide recommendations related to services, accessibility, and inclusion.

Why does this matter?

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents, continued opportunities for community engagement help ensure that lived experiences are considered when decisions are made about programs, services, and accessibility.

Fairfax County Funding Decisions

What changed?

Fairfax County's FY2027 budget process included difficult decisions about nonprofit funding and human services investments.

NVRC funding was reduced as part of broader funding decisions affecting nonprofit providers.

Why does this matter?

Community organizations often provide specialized expertise and services that complement government programs.

For NVRC, community support helps sustain programs that provide:

- Education
- Advocacy
- Technology assistance
- Communication access resources
- Community connection
- Support for individuals and families

Looking Ahead

NVRC remains committed to working with Fairfax County and other partners to ensure Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents continue to have access to information, resources, and opportunities to participate fully in community life.

Arlington County

Policy Areas to Watch

Arlington County continues to invest in areas that affect people with disabilities and older adults, including:

- Human services
- Aging services
- Housing
- Community supports
- Accessibility initiatives

Why does this matter?

Disability inclusion is strongest when communities consider accessibility as part of every program and service.

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents, continued partnership and communication with local decision-makers help ensure that communication access is included in broader disability and aging priorities.

Loudoun County

Growing Through Partnership

Loudoun County continues to experience significant growth, increasing the need for accessible services and community partnerships.

Policy areas to watch include:

- Aging services
- Human services
- Transportation
- Community supports
- Disability inclusion

Why does this matter?

As communities grow, accessibility needs to grow with them.

Building communication access into services from the beginning creates stronger communities for everyone.

Prince William County

Planning for the Future

Prince William County's continued growth creates both challenges and opportunities.

Policy areas to watch include:

- Human services
- Transportation
- Housing
- Community partnerships
- Disability inclusion

Why does this matter?

Growing communities have the opportunity to build accessibility into systems early rather than trying to address barriers later.

City of Fairfax

Future Partnership Opportunity

The City of Fairfax is an important part of NVRC's service area and community network.

NVRC is not currently a funded partner with the City of Fairfax. However, NVRC hopes to explore future opportunities to partner with the City, including a potential RFP opportunity in the fall.

Policy Areas to Watch

Areas that affect Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents include:

- Accessibility initiatives
- Community services
- Aging services
- Emergency preparedness
- Community partnerships

Why does this matter?

Local partnerships help ensure Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents are included in community planning and that communication access is considered as part of broader accessibility efforts.

City of Alexandria

Policy Areas to Watch

Alexandria's budget priorities include areas such as:

- Older adult services
- Housing
- Transportation
- Community programs
- Disability-related services

Community Opportunity

NVRC requested funding support from the City of Alexandria but was not selected.

Alexandria continues to invest in programs and services supporting older adults and people with disabilities. An ongoing opportunity is ensuring that Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents are included in those conversations and that communication access is part of broader accessibility planning.

COMMUNITY ADVOCACY: HOW YOU CAN PARTICIPATE

Policy changes happen when communities stay informed, share their experiences, and work together with decision-makers.

Every person has a role in helping create a more accessible community.

Stay Informed

Understanding how decisions are made is the first step toward effective advocacy.

Ways to stay informed include:

- Following NVRC updates and community announcements
- Learning about proposed legislation and budgets
- Attending community meetings
- Following local government decisions
- Connecting with trusted advocacy organizations

Policies often change before people notice the impact. Staying informed helps individuals and communities respond early.

Share Your Experience

Personal experiences help decision-makers understand the real impact of policies.

Statistics and data are important, but stories help explain:

- What barriers people face
- Where systems are working
- Where improvements are needed
- How decisions affect daily life

When sharing your experience:

- Explain the situation
 - Describe the impact
 - Identify the barrier
 - Suggest possible solutions
-

Communicating With Elected Officials

- Members of Congress
- Virginia legislators
- County Boards of Supervisors
- City Councils
- Government agencies

You do not need to be a policy expert to participate.

A powerful advocacy message often includes:**1. Who you are**

Introduce yourself and your connection to the issue.

2. What you are asking about

Explain the policy, program, or decision.

3. Why it matters

Share how it affects you or your community.

4. What action you would like to see

Ask for continued attention, support, or a specific change.

Building Relationships Matters

Effective advocacy is not only about contacting officials when there is a problem.

Strong relationships develop through:

- Education
- Collaboration
- Consistent communication
- Sharing community needs
- Recognizing progress

Many important accessibility improvements happen because communities, organizations, and policymakers work together.

Advocacy Is More Than Legislation

Change does not happen only when a new law is passed.

Advocacy also happens through:

- Budget discussions
- Public comments
- Advisory boards
- Community partnerships
- Agency conversations

Education and awareness

A decision about funding, staffing, or program priorities can have just as much impact as a new law.

NVRC's ROLE

NVRC works to support the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community through:

- Education
- Advocacy
- Resources
- Communication access information
- Technology assistance
- Community programs
- Partnerships

Part of NVRC's mission is helping individuals, families, professionals, and community partners understand changes that affect communication, access, and inclusion.

RESOURCES

For more information and updates:

Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons (NVRC)

Website: www.nvrc.org

Follow NVRC for:

- Policy updates
- Community events
- Educational programs
- Advocacy opportunities
- Resources for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals and families

FINAL MESSAGE

Policies affect our everyday lives.

They influence:

- How we communicate
- How we access healthcare
- How we work
- How we receive information
- How we participate in our communities

Understanding policy helps us recognize challenges, identify opportunities, and advocate for a more accessible future.

Change happens when communities stay informed, share their experiences, and work together.