

POLICY WATCH 2026

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POLICY WATCH 2026

COMPREHENSIVE Q&A PREPARATION GUIDE

FEDERAL DISABILITY RIGHTS

1. Is the ADA going away?

Facts:

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

- Passed in 1990
- Federal civil rights law protecting people with disabilities
- Prohibits discrimination in:
 - employment
 - government services
 - public accommodations
 - transportation
 - telecommunications

Answer:

"No. The ADA is not going away.

The ADA is a federal civil rights law. A change in administration does not eliminate the law.

What can change is how the law is enforced, what issues federal agencies prioritize, how regulations are interpreted, and how courts decide certain cases.

That is why staying informed matters. Our rights do not disappear overnight, but understanding changes helps us know how to advocate effectively."

2. What does the ADA require for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people?

Facts:

The ADA requires **effective communication**.

It does not require one specific accommodation in every situation.

Possible accommodations include:

- Qualified ASL interpreter
- CART captioning
- Assistive listening technology
- Captioning
- Written communication
- Other communication supports

Answer:

"The important phrase is effective communication.

The ADA recognizes that communication access is not one-size-fits-all.

The right solution depends on the individual and the situation.

A medical appointment, a workplace meeting, a classroom, and a casual conversation may require different approaches.

The goal is making sure a Deaf or Hard of Hearing person has communication access that is equal and effective."

3. Does the ADA guarantee an interpreter?

Facts:

The ADA does not automatically require an interpreter in every situation.

The organization must determine what accommodation provides effective communication.

Answer:

"The ADA does not say every situation requires an interpreter.

It requires effective communication.

For some individuals and situations, an ASL interpreter is the appropriate solution.

For others, CART, captioning, assistive technology, or another accommodation may be effective.

The important question is not 'What is the cheapest option?' The question is 'What provides meaningful access?'"

4. Can a business, doctor, or organization require me to bring my own interpreter?

Facts:

Organizations generally cannot require individuals to provide their own communication access.

Family members should not normally be used as interpreters.

Answer:

"No.

Organizations have responsibilities under disability rights laws to provide effective communication.

A family member or friend may want to help, but important conversations involving healthcare, legal issues, employment, or education should not depend on a family member interpreting.

There are concerns about accuracy, privacy, and whether the person can communicate freely."

5. What is Section 504?

Facts:

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Purpose:

Prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in programs receiving federal financial assistance.

Examples:

- Hospitals receiving Medicare/Medicaid
- Public schools
- Colleges and universities
- Libraries
- Transportation systems
- Many nonprofit organizations

Answer:

"Many people know the ADA, but fewer people know Section 504.

Section 504 is important because it applies to organizations receiving federal funding.

For many people, Section 504 affects everyday places they interact with — healthcare, education, transportation, and community services.

The ADA and Section 504 often work together to protect access."

6. What is the difference between ADA and Section 504?

Answer:

"The ADA is broader and applies to many public and private entities.

Section 504 specifically applies when an organization receives federal financial assistance.

Many organizations must follow both laws, creating multiple layers of protection."

7. What is the Olmstead decision?

Facts:

Olmstead v. L.C. (1999)

- U.S. Supreme Court decision
- Based on the ADA
- Established the right to receive services in the most integrated setting appropriate

Answer:

"Olmstead is one of the most important disability rights decisions many people have never heard of.

The basic idea is that people with disabilities should not be unnecessarily separated from their communities.

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, that principle supports access where life happens — healthcare, employment, education, recreation, and community services."

HEALTHCARE ACCESS

8. Why is healthcare communication access such a major issue?

Facts:

Healthcare involves:

- Diagnosis
- Treatment decisions
- Medication instructions
- Consent

Communication errors can affect safety.

Answer:

"Healthcare is one of the areas where communication access matters most.

If someone does not fully understand a diagnosis, treatment options, or instructions, that can directly affect their health and safety.

Communication access is not just about convenience. It is about receiving equal healthcare."

9. What should someone do if a healthcare provider refuses communication access?

Answer:

"Start by clearly explaining what communication access you need.

Ask for the office manager, patient advocate, or accessibility coordinator if necessary.

Document what happened.

Organizations often respond better when they understand the specific barrier and the solution needed.

NVRC can help individuals understand their rights and advocate for access."

10. Can a hospital say they will only use an app or automatic captions?

Answer:

"The goal is effective communication.

Technology can be helpful, but organizations cannot simply assume that one solution works for everyone.

The question is whether the communication is actually effective for that individual and that situation."

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

11. Will AI replace CART?

Facts:

AI captioning:

- Can be useful
- Continues to improve
- Has limitations

CART:

- Professional captioning
- Higher accuracy
- Handles context, terminology, names

Answer:

"No.

AI is an exciting tool, but it does not replace professional captioning in every situation.

The more important question is what level of accuracy and access is needed.

A casual conversation and a medical appointment are very different situations."

12. Are AI captions enough to meet ADA requirements?

Answer:

"The ADA standard is effective communication.

Technology can help provide access, but organizations still have the responsibility to make sure communication is effective.

The existence of technology does not automatically mean accessibility has been achieved."

VIRGINIA OPEN CAPTION LAW

13. What is HB 602?

Facts:

Virginia House Bill 602

- Open Captioning at Motion Picture Theaters
- Effective July 1, 2026

Purpose:

Increase access to movies for people who benefit from captions

Answer:

"HB 602 is Virginia's Open Caption Law.

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

This is one of the most visible recent accessibility victories directly affecting Deaf and Hard of Hearing Virginians."

14. What are open captions?

Answer:

"Open captions are captions displayed directly on the movie screen where everyone can see them.

The difference is independence.

People do not have to request equipment, pick up a device, or worry whether the technology works.

Accessibility becomes part of the normal experience."

15. Does HB 602 require every movie showing to have captions?

Answer:

"No.

The law does not require every showing of every movie to have open captions.

It requires theaters to provide regularly scheduled open-caption opportunities so people who need or prefer captions can participate."

VIRGINIA OPEN CAPTION LAW / STATE POLICY

16. Why is the Open Caption Law such an important change?

Facts:

- HB 602 creates a statewide requirement for scheduled open-caption movie showings.
- It moves accessibility from an individual request to an available option.

Answer:

"One of the reasons this law is so important is that it changes the way we think about accessibility.

For many years, Deaf and Hard of Hearing people have often had to request access, explain their needs, or use separate equipment.

Open captions make accessibility part of the experience from the beginning.

That benefits not only Deaf and Hard of Hearing people, but anyone who benefits from captions."

17. Who benefits from open captions besides Deaf and Hard of Hearing people?

Facts:

Caption users include:

- Older adults experiencing hearing loss
- People with auditory processing challenges
- People learning English
- Families
- People watching in noisy environments

Answer:

"Accessibility often benefits more people than we originally expect.

Open captions are designed to address communication access for Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, but many other people find captions helpful.

This is a good example of how accessibility improvements can benefit the broader community."

18. Are there other Virginia laws that changed July 1 that affect our community?

Facts:

- HB 602 is the major Virginia law specifically connected to Deaf and Hard of Hearing accessibility.
- Other changes often happen through:
 - budgets
 - agency decisions
 - regulations
 - implementation of existing laws

Answer:

"The Open Caption Law is the biggest recent Virginia law directly affecting the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community.

Beyond that, many important changes happen through policy decisions rather than a new law.

That includes funding decisions, agency priorities, and how existing protections are implemented."

19. Why didn't you talk about more Virginia disability laws?

Answer:

"Because policy is broader than legislation.

A new law is one way change happens, but budgets, regulations, and government decisions can have just as much impact on people's daily lives.

This presentation is really about understanding the full policy landscape — what changes, why it matters, and how it affects our community."

20. What is the Virginia Human Rights Act?

Facts:

Virginia Human Rights Act

- Virginia anti-discrimination law
- Protects against discrimination in areas including employment and public accommodations
-

Answer:

"The Virginia Human Rights Act is one of the state protections that works alongside federal disability rights laws.

For Deaf and Hard of Hearing Virginians, it connects to issues like employment access, reasonable accommodations, and equal participation."

21. How do state budgets affect Deaf and Hard of Hearing people?

Facts:

Budgets determine:

- programs funded
- services available
- staffing
- community investments

Answer:

"Budgets are policy.

A decision does not have to be a new law to affect our community.

When funding priorities change, it can affect whether programs exist, how services are delivered, and whether people can access the support they need."

22. Why talk about local government in a disability rights presentation?

Facts:

Local governments make decisions about:

- human services
- aging programs
- transportation
- housing
- community grants
- accessibility initiatives

Answer:

"Many decisions that affect people's daily lives happen locally.

A county budget decision can impact services just as much as a law passed at the state or federal level.

That is why local policy matters."

23. What role does advocacy play in changing policy?

Facts:

Policy change often involves:

- lived experience
- community organizing
- relationships
- education

Answer:

"Advocacy is how communities make sure decision-makers understand the real impact of policies.

Numbers and data are important, but personal experiences help explain why an issue matters.

The Open Caption Law is a great example of what can happen when people share their experiences and work together."

24. How did the Open Caption Law happen?

Answer:

"The Open Caption Law happened because members of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community identified a barrier, shared their experiences, and worked with legislators and advocates to create change.

It is a reminder that advocacy works.

Change often happens when communities, organizations, and policymakers work together."

25. What can individuals do to influence policy?

Answer:

"Stay informed, participate, and share your experiences.

People often think advocacy requires being an expert in government, but one of the most powerful things someone can do is explain how a policy affects their daily life.

Decision-makers need to hear from the people impacted by their decisions."

FAIRFAX COUNTY – SPEECH & HEARING PROGRAM

26. What was the Fairfax County Speech & Hearing Program?

Facts:

- Fairfax County Health Department program
- Not Fairfax County Public Schools
- Provided speech, language, and hearing-related services
- Served residents across the lifespan

Answer:

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

It was separate from Fairfax County Public Schools and separate from NVRC.

The program served people across the lifespan, including children, adults, and older adults."

27. Was the Speech & Hearing Program part of Fairfax County Public Schools?

Answer:

"No.

This is an important distinction.

Fairfax County Public Schools does provide speech and related services for eligible students through the education system.

The Speech & Hearing Program was a separate Fairfax County Health Department program that served residents more broadly."

28. Did the Speech & Hearing Program serve seniors?

Answer:

"Yes.

While many people associated the program with children because speech services are often connected with schools, the program also served adults and older adults.

That is an important part of the conversation because older adults experiencing hearing loss are not served through school-based programs."

29. Why did Fairfax County close the Speech & Hearing Program?

Facts:

Fairfax County's reasoning:

- Similar services available elsewhere
- Reduced duplication
- Budget priorities

Answer:

"Fairfax County determined that the program was no longer needed as a County-operated service because similar services were available through other systems, including schools, private providers, and insurance-based services.

The community conversation is whether those alternatives fully meet the needs of all residents.

Having a service available somewhere does not always mean everyone can access it."

30. Why does closing the program matter if services still exist elsewhere?

Answer:

"The question is not only whether a service exists.

The question is whether people can actually access it.

People may face barriers related to:

- cost,
- insurance,
- transportation,
- awareness,
- navigating the healthcare system.

A public program can sometimes serve as a trusted entry point for people who do not know where to begin."

31. Why does this especially matter for older adults?

Facts:

- Hearing loss increases with age
- Seniors may need navigation support
- School programs do not serve older adults

Answer:

"This is one of the concerns raised by the community.

Older adults experiencing hearing loss are not connected to school-based services.

They often need support understanding their options, accessing technology, and finding resources.

When a program changes, we need to make sure people do not fall through the cracks."

32. Was the Speech & Hearing Program like NVRC?

Answer:

"No. They addressed related needs, but they served different purposes.

The Speech & Hearing Program was a health-related service.

NVRC focuses on:

- advocacy,
- education,
- communication access,
- technology,
- community connection,
- helping Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals and families navigate resources.

We overlap in our commitment to communication access, but we are not the same type of organization."

33. Is NVRC replacing the Speech & Hearing Program?

Answer:

"No.

NVRC is not replacing a clinical speech or hearing program.

Our role is different.

We help people understand hearing loss, access resources, advocate for communication access, learn about technology options, and stay connected to their communities."

FAIRFAX COUNTY FUNDING

34. Why did Fairfax County reduce NVRC funding?

Facts:

- Funding reduction was part of broader nonprofit funding decisions
- Not performance-related

Answer:

"The reduction was part of Fairfax County's broader process of making difficult budget decisions and distributing limited nonprofit funding.

It was not related to NVRC's performance.

NVRC continues to demonstrate strong community impact, and we remain committed to serving Fairfax County residents."

35. Does reduced funding mean NVRC will reduce services?

Answer:

"Our goal is to continue providing the services our community depends on.

Like every nonprofit, we continue to look for sustainable funding through government partnerships, grants, donors, and community support.

The need for our services continues to grow."

36. Why should local governments fund organizations like NVRC?

Answer:

"Organizations like NVRC provide specialized expertise that government cannot always provide alone.

We bring:

- decades of experience,
- trusted community relationships,
- direct understanding of Deaf and Hard of Hearing needs.

Strong communities are built through partnerships between government, nonprofits, businesses, and residents."

LOCAL GOVERNMENT QUESTIONS

37. Why did you include Fairfax County in this presentation?

Answer:

"Fairfax County is one of NVRC's largest service areas and has been a long-time partner.

Local decisions about budgets, programs, and services directly affect the residents we serve."

38. Why did you include Arlington?

Answer:

"Arlington is part of our service region and has a strong commitment to disability, aging, and community services.

The purpose of this section is not just to talk about funding — it is to understand how each community is approaching accessibility and where opportunities exist."

39. Are you criticizing Alexandria?

Answer:

"No.

The goal is not criticism.

Alexandria has made important investments in areas such as aging services, housing, transportation, and community supports.

The opportunity is making sure Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents are included in those broader accessibility conversations."

40. Why talk about Prince William County if NVRC has limited services there?

Answer:

"Because accessibility needs exist across the region.

Prince William County is growing quickly, and as communities grow, the need for accessible services and communication access grows as well.

The goal is building relationships and identifying opportunities for partnership."

NVRC ROLE / ADVOCACY

41. What is NVRC's role in policy?

Answer:

"NVRC's role is not only providing programs.

It is also helping educate the community, identify barriers, advocate for change, and bring the experiences of Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents into policy conversations."

42. What is the biggest challenge facing the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community today?

Answer:

"One of the biggest challenges is making sure communication access keeps up with a rapidly changing world.

Technology is changing quickly, our population is aging, and accessibility needs to be considered from the beginning rather than added afterward."

43. What is the biggest opportunity?

Answer:

"The biggest opportunity is collaboration.

We are seeing more awareness, more partnerships, and more recognition that accessibility benefits everyone.

The strongest changes happen when communities, organizations, and policymakers work together."

44. What can people do to help create change?

Answer:

"Stay informed, participate, and share your experiences.

People sometimes think advocacy requires being an expert in government.

It does not.

One of the most powerful things someone can do is explain how an issue affects their daily life."

45. What is the one thing you want people to remember from this presentation?

Answer:

"Policy is not something that happens somewhere else.

Policy affects our daily lives — how we communicate, receive healthcare, work, learn, and participate in our communities.

The more informed we are, the better prepared we are to advocate for ourselves and create change."