



**For Immediate Release**

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## D.C. Government and Equal Rights Center Reach Agreement to Make District Agencies More Accessible for Individuals Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

WASHINGTON, D.C., June 7, 2011—Today, the [Equal Rights Center](#) (ERC)—a national non-profit civil rights organization—and the District of Columbia announced their agreement to make sign language interpreters and auxiliary aids and services available throughout District agencies for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing.

“This is an incredible, cutting-edge agreement that will use some of the most current technologies to improve the accessibility of government services here in our nation’s capital. This agreement will provide District residents who are deaf or hard of hearing the same access to programs and services that the hearing community take for granted to protect our health and well-being everyday” said Don Kahl, Executive Director of the ERC. “Being able to effectively communicate with a police officer, a school principal, or other government agents is a basic civil right that is largely ignored until there is a problem. The ERC is very pleased that the District has responded to residents’ concerns, and continues to move toward being one of the most progressive jurisdictions across the country in advancing and protecting the civil rights of its residents and visitors.”

The agreement, resolving a lawsuit filed by the ERC and others in 2007, takes important and ground-breaking steps to ensure individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing are given equal opportunities to participate in, and enjoy the benefits of, the District’s services, programs, and activities:

- **Interpreter Contract:** Qualified sign language interpreters will be available upon request for communications with all D.C. agencies through a contract with an interpreter referral service. The D.C. Office of Disability Rights will have primary responsibility to secure interpreter services for the agencies;
- **Metropolitan Police Department:** The MPD will, among other steps:
  - Ensure availability of specially qualified sign language interpreters on a 24/7 basis;
  - Maintain its Deaf and Hard of Hearing Liaison Unit;
  - Maintain at least one Videophone in each station and substation; and
  - Maintain a novel pilot program providing at least two mobile Video Remote Interpreting devices to allow for “in the field” interpreting services;

- **DC Public Schools:** DCPS will obtain a minimum of seven Video Remote Interpreting devices to ensure that deaf parents and others can communicate effectively with schools in urgent or unscheduled situations;
- **DC Department of Mental Health:** The Department of Mental Health will:
  - Secure Video Remote Interpreting for its Comprehensive Psychiatric Emergency Program to ensure an ability to communicate with deaf patients on a 24/7 basis; and
  - Maintain at least one Videophone at St. Elizabeth’s hospital for use by patients and staff who are deaf.

In addition to these requirements, all District agency personnel will undergo communication training and the District will develop a public education program that will notify the public of the availability of these services. The District of Columbia has also agreed to compensate the ERC and two individual plaintiffs for their damages and attorneys’ fees incurred in this matter.

“Ensuring all individuals can communicate with their government is not only a pillar of the Americans with Disabilities Act, but also a pillar of a successful society and democracy,” said Elaine Gardner, Disability Rights Project Director at the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs. “The agreement with D.C. is truly a landmark settlement, and provides a model for other local governments in communicating with residents who are deaf or hard of hearing.”

In 2007, the ERC received complaints from its members that D.C agencies were failing to provide reasonable accommodations such as qualified sign language interpreters and teletypewriters (“TTY’s”), to assure adequate communication with members of the public who are deaf or hard of hearing, violating both the Americans with Disabilities Act and the D.C. Human Rights Act.

In reaching this agreement, the ERC was represented by the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights & Urban Affairs and the Washington law of firm Steptoe & Johnson, LLP.

To access this release on the ERC’s website, please visit [www.equalrightscenter.org/dcagencies](http://www.equalrightscenter.org/dcagencies)

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**About the Equal Rights Center ([www.equalrightscenter.org](http://www.equalrightscenter.org))**

Formed in 1983, the Equal Rights Center (ERC) is a national non-profit civil rights organization based in Washington, D.C. With members located in 46 states and the District of Columbia, the ERC works nationally to promote equal opportunity in housing, employment, disability rights, immigrant rights, and access to public accommodations and government services for all protected classes under federal, state, and local laws.

**About the Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs (<http://www.washlaw.org/>)**

The Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs was established in 1968 to provide pro bono legal services to address issues of discrimination and entrenched poverty. Since its founding, the Committee has handled more than 5,000 cases on behalf of individuals and advocacy organizations in the areas of equal employment, fair housing, public accommodations, public education, asylum and refugee rights, and disability rights. For more information about the Committee, see [www.washlaw.org](http://www.washlaw.org). The Committee can be reached at 202.319.1000.

**About Steptoe & Johnson, LLP (<http://www.step toe.com>)**

Step toe & Johnson LLP has over 65 years of practice and over 400 attorneys in offices in Beijing, Brussels, Century City, Chicago, London, Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, and Washington, DC providing counsel and representation in a wide range of legal fields. The firm also has a long and rich tradition of public service, handling a full spectrum of pro bono matters. Step toe attorneys record over 30,000 pro bono hours annually, and the firm has been ranked as one of the Top 25 Pro Bono Law Firms by the American Lawyer.