Mental Health Videophone Support Available to Assist Sign Language Users During COVID-19 Outbreak

The ACCESS Program at St. Joseph's Helpline Offers Emotional Support to Sign Language Users During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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(TRENTON) – A free emotional support helpline is now available to deaf and hard of hearing New Jerseyans feeling the emotional and mental toll of COVID-19.

With support from the New Jersey Department of Human Services, ACCESS at St. Joseph's Health in Paterson is offering help in American S Language to people dealing with anxiety and worry related to the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. New Jerseyans can call the videophone helpline at **973-870-0677** for free, confidential support. Direct communication in sign language will be offered from 9 a.m. to 5 p Monday through Friday by live trained specialists.

NJ Human Services' Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services and its Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing are providing support to ACCESS at St. Joseph's to operate the helpline.

"This is a very challenging time for so many of us," said NJ Human Services Commissioner Carole Johnson. "We want to make sure that all New Jerseyans have a safe space to communicate to someone about their worries and concerns. This videophone helpline ensures that New Jerseyans who are deaf and hard of hearing can get the help they need."

"Staying connected with others can help reduce anxiety and make people feel more in control," Human Services' Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services Assistant Commissioner Valerie Mielke said. "The trained specialists answering these videophones can help people take care of their mental health during this difficult time."

"Having the opportunity to communicate directly in sign language with a trained staff person can go a long way toward reducing anxiety and creating a safe space to talk about one's worries," said Elizabeth Hill, Director of Human Services' Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. "We are proud to partner with our colleagues at the Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services as well as ACCESS at St. Joseph's on this initiative."

"We are so pleased to have this opportunity to provide emotional support and resources to the deaf and hard of hearing residents of New Jersey via American Sign Language using the newly established videophone helpline," said Carol Uckar, Director of ACCESS at St. Joseph's Health.

"St. Joseph's Health is dedicated to providing outreach and support to all individuals in need, and this was a natural step. We are proud to be able to provide this additional resource for our community," said Tina Miles, Director of Behavioral Health Services at St. Joseph's Health.

ACCESS at St. Joseph's has long served New Jersey's deaf and hard of hearing individuals in need of mental health support through culturally and linguistically appropriate staff. ACCESS will also continue to offer general mental health support and referral. It does not provide any medical or financial advice or referrals.

This videophone is in addition to NJ Human Services' mental health support line offered through the Mental Health Association of New Jersey. NJMentalHealthCares offers free, confidential support seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. New Jerseyans can call **1-866-202-HELP (4357)** to reach live, trained specialists. Deaf and hard of hearing individuals can also call **1-877-294-4356 TTY**.

The Division of Deaf and Hard of Hearing has also launched a website for the latest COVID-19 information: https://nj.gov/humanservices/ddhh/coronavirus.shtml. The website offers videos with ASL translation, communication access tips for dealing with healthcare professionals during COVID-19, as well as COVID-19 communication cards available in English and Spanish.

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Department of Human Services
222 South Warren Street
PO Box 700
Trenton, NJ 08625-0700