



U.S. Department of Justice

*United States Attorney's Office
Eastern District of Wisconsin*

*Federal Courthouse
517 E. Wisconsin Ave, Rm 530
Milwaukee WI 53202*

*(414)297-1700
Fax (414) 297-1738
www.usdoj.gov/usao/wie*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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United States Justice Department Secures Agreement with Wisconsin Department of Corrections to Improve Communication Access for Incarcerated People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Gregory J. Haanstad, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Wisconsin, joins the Civil Rights Division in announcing a settlement agreement has been reached with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (WDOC) under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The settlement will help ensure that incarcerated individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing have equal access to WDOC's programs, services and activities, including educational, counseling, medical, recreational and prison employment programs. The agreement resolves the department's investigation into complaints that WDOC did not provide auxiliary aids and services, such as sign language interpreters, to incarcerated individuals with hearing disabilities.

Under the settlement agreement, WDOC will provide inmates with hearing disabilities appropriate auxiliary aids and services, such as sign language interpreters, video telephones, visual notification systems and hearing aids when necessary. WDOC must also make reasonable modifications to its policies, practices and procedures to accommodate inmates with disabilities, such as handcuffing in front to allow an individual who uses sign language to communicate, and allowing additional time for telephone calls that rely on an interpreter.

"The ability for incarcerated people with hearing disabilities to understand and to be understood is a critical protection provided by the ADA," said Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. "The Civil Rights Division is committed to ensuring that correctional institutions eliminate barriers, including communication barriers, that prevent inmates with disabilities from participating fully in prison programs."

“People with disabilities in Wisconsin deserve equal access, and that does not change when they are incarcerated,” said U.S. Attorney Haanstad. “Our office remains dedicated to supporting efforts to improve access and inclusion for everyone in Wisconsin.”

As a result of the agreement announced today, WDOC will implement a process that begins at intake, and continues throughout incarceration, to identify and accommodate inmates with hearing disabilities; develop individualized communication assessment and plans; provide training on the ADA to staff; and pay \$15,000 to compensate three incarcerated individuals who were harmed.

The Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division and U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Wisconsin handled the matter.

The Justice Department plays a central role in advancing the nation’s goal of equal opportunity, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities. For more information on the Civil Rights Division, please visit www.justice.gov/crt. For more information on the ADA, please call the department’s toll-free ADA Information Line at 800-514-0301 (TDD 800-514-0383) or visit www.ada.gov. ADA complaints may be filed online at www.ada.gov/complaint. Additional information about the U.S. Attorney’s Office’s Civil Rights Programs is available at www.justice.gov/usao-edwi/civil-rights.

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For further information contact:
Public Information Officer Kenneth.Gales@usdoj.gov
(414) 297-1700

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