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CONTACT: PRESS@dss.nyc.gov

The NYC Department of Social Services Launches New Communications Tool for New Yorkers Experiencing Homelessness Who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

The CommuniCard Also Serves New Yorkers with Unique Communication Needs and Language Barriers Across the Shelter System

New Initiative Marks Important Step in Strengthening Access to Services for Vulnerable New Yorkers during Disability Pride Month

NEW YORK – Today, NYC Department of Social Services (DSS) Commissioner Erin Dalton announced the launch of the CommuniCard, a visual communications tool for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness who are deaf, hard-of-hearing, or have other unique communication needs. This tool allows vulnerable New Yorkers to convey basic needs and urgent requests and will be available to clients and staff across intake facilities, shelters, and outreach programs. This tool does not replace the need for an interpreter but builds on existing interpretation services which are already in place across the city’s homeless services system.

The tri-fold [card](#) features symbols to reflect basic needs, a pain scale, assistance with scheduling appointments with case workers, and ASL signs for the letters of the alphabet and numbers from 0 to 12. The card also features a QR code that links to a public [webpage](#), featuring videos in ASL regarding agency resources, including one that [explains how to use the CommuniCard](#) and a link to download the CommuniCard in 15 different languages, enabling its use anywhere in the world. The CommuniCard meaningfully expands the suite of language services the agency provides.

"The CommuniCard will have a huge impact on those experiencing homelessness who are deaf or hard of hearing, a vulnerable population embedded within another," said **Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Dr. Helen Arteaga**. "By helping these New Yorkers communicate their basic needs without delay, we are making critical resources more accessible and placing them on a path toward safe, dignified housing."

"The CommuniCard furthers our goal of building an accessible safety net that meets the needs of all New Yorkers," said **Department of Social Services Commissioner Erin Dalton**. "The tool’s universal design and versatility allows its use across various agencies and is now publicly available for anyone to use. We hope the card will have a wide-reaching impact on those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing."

"Today’s announcement is an example of improving access to the City’s shelter system and addressing the needs of New Yorkers with disabilities who are experiencing homelessness," said **Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities Commissioner Nisha Agarwal**. "The CommuniCard is a novel tool that we are excited to celebrate and assist in disseminating. It allows a person experiencing homelessness who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing

to communicate effectively with more outreach workers and ultimately take steps on a path to shelter and safe, stable housing. Thank you to DSS for your innovation and partnership.”

“The CommuniCard exemplifies the way that DSS is approaching the work we do to serve people with disabilities successfully. Using the “Nothing About Us Without Us” approach, we worked directly with the Deaf community and our provider agencies, over the course of two years, to create the most useful tool possible for clients who are deaf in our shelter system,” said **DSS’s Executive Director of Disability Affairs Jennifer Shaoul**. “The fact that this card can be used to support people with cognitive disabilities, people with communication disabilities, people with language barriers, is a plus. I am proud that we were able to develop a tool that can be utilized, at no cost, anywhere in the world.”

“The Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Office is proud to endorse the CommuniCard as an effective tool for communication across the DSS shelter system,” said **Executive Director of New York State Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Office Christopher Woodfill**. This initiative marks an important step toward ensuring equitable access, improving shelter experiences, and building a more inclusive environment for Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing New Yorkers.”

“Language enables us to communicate what we need and what we want. In the NYC DSS shelter system, people communicate in more than twenty languages 24/7 to get their needs met,” said **Associate Director at the NYS Office of the Chief of Disability Affairs Ben Thapa**. “The DSS has empowered that communication with a wonderful new tool in the Communicard which a person can use to make their basic needs known very quickly - including the need for an interpreter - at any time of day or night. I commend the inclusive design of the pictures, the QR code, the sign language components, and the care for people that is so evident in this Communicard. Thank you, NYC DSS, for creating this and for including our disability communities in the iterative process.”

“It has been rewarding to collaborate with the Department of Social Services on a project that centers the communication needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing New Yorkers,” said **Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities ASL Direct Program Supervisor Ronald (Tony) A. Wooden Jr.** “From providing feedback on the CommuniCard’s design to helping develop the accompanying ASL instructional video, our goal was to ensure this tool is practical, accessible, and informed by the lived experiences of the Deaf community. While the CommuniCard is not a substitute for qualified ASL interpreters or other communication accommodations, it is an important resource that can help facilitate immediate communication and improve communication access to services for New Yorkers experiencing homelessness.”

“At The New York Foundling, we know that communication is key to helping people access critical supports and services,” said **Assistant Vice President of Prevention Services at NY Foundling Kyle Kalski**. “The CommuniCard is a simple but powerful tool that will help people communicate immediate needs, navigate barriers, and connect with resources. We’re grateful that our Deaf Services team and the individuals and families we support were able to contribute to its development, and we’re excited to see this innovative resource expand access and understanding in communities across New York City.”

“We are really grateful for DSS releasing the CommuniCard. This tool greatly increases basic communications between individuals who are deaf and those that are hearing,” said **Executive Director of Bronx Independent Living Services Brett Eisenberg**. “It is imperative that the needs of individuals who are deaf be addressed just as timely as anyone else and the CommuniCard is a great step in that direction. Bronx Independent Living Services (BILS) looks forward to the wide release of the CommuniCard and we look forward to working with HRA and the administration as a whole on other tools to enhance the lives of all individuals with disabilities.”

According to the American Community Survey census report, there are around 1 million New Yorkers with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities are [twice as likely to face poverty](#). In CY25, around 30% of DSS clients were users of languages other than English, and DSS’s sign-language interpretation services were used nearly 1,600 times. With the influx of asylum seekers in recent years, DSS’s Office of Refugee and Immigrant Affairs (ORIA) has seen an exponential increase in need for interpretation services.

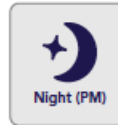
DSS’s Office of Disability Affairs (ODA) works closely with Mayor’s Office for People with Disabilities (MOPD) and provides disability trainings to thousands of staffers and external stakeholders including community-based organizations. Any New Yorkers in need of ASL services can access the city’s [ASL Direct](#) resource which is a video calling system to connect American Sign Language (ASL) to an information specialist who is fluent in ASL and get information about City services and other resources directly in ASL rather than through an interpreter or via text.



CommuniCard



Make an appointment



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About the New York City Department of Social Services: DSS, comprised of the Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Human Resources Administration (HRA), serves millions of New Yorkers annually through a broad range of services that aim to address poverty and prevent homelessness. DHS oversees a broad network of shelters, re-housing solutions, and outreach programs designed to help New Yorkers experiencing homelessness get back on their feet. HRA serves over three million New Yorkers through the administration of more than 15 major public assistance programs. DSS is central to the City’s mission to expand opportunity for New Yorkers in need, address housing insecurity, and ensure that low-income New Yorkers receive the benefits and assistance for which they may be eligible.

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