

## **Library for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing: Inaccessible Fortress or Welcoming Space?**

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The aim of this presentation is to share the experience of working with the deaf and hard of hearing community in Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library. Moreover, to present the development process and implementation of the new service – video guide for deaf and hard of hearing people. Also the specifics of deaf and hard of hearing community will be presented. There are a lot of times when libraries and librarians don't know this community, don't understand their needs and what libraries can give to deaf and hard of hearing.

About 5 percent of whole world are deaf. It makes about 360 million people. 70 million of deaf people are speaking sign language. Hearing loss or deafness is sometimes called invisible disability. And the community of deaf or hard of hearing can be called invisible users of the library. Quite often, they either do not use library services, or use them without any interaction with librarians. And because of that libraries do not know the needs of these users or even don't think that this community has some special needs. There is a common myth that deaf people understand all written information in the same way as people without disabilities.

So, the first step when thinking about working with deaf and hard of hearing people is to get to know the community. There are about 8, 5 thousand deaf people in Lithuania, and about 30 thousand people are hard of hearing. There are about one thousand deaf people in Vilnius and about 1 200 deaf people in Vilnius county.

What it means to be deaf or hard of hearing? Members of deaf community are saying that there are two ways to define this disability: medical and cultural approach. From medical point of view deaf person is someone who can't process linguistic information that is received through hearing even with usage of hearing aid. In a simpler term, it refers to a hearing loss so severe that there is very little or no functional hearing. Hard of hearing person is someone that has residual hearing and can process linguistic information with the help of hearing aid. Typically, a person with residual hearing can use verbal communication. What can cause hearing impairment? Sometimes is genetics, sometimes different diseases – infections or viruses, intoxications, injuries and so on. Lot of scientists describe hearing impairment not only as a medical but also as social problem. Hearing impairment or loss causes variety of social, emotional and psychological problems.

But cultural approach towards hearing loss or hearing impairment says that first of all deaf and hard of hearing community is a linguistic minority that is communicating through sign language. Lithuanian sign language is used by more than 6 000 people. There is no universal, international sign language. Different nations speak different sign languages, there are about 100 different sign languages in the world. However, various sign languages have similar grammatical structure. So as it is mentioned before, there are about 6 000 people in Lithuania that speak sign language. Most of them declare that sign language and not Lithuanian language is their mother language. In 1995, Lithuanian sign language was officially legitimized as a mother language of the deaf people. Sign language is a basis of cultural and linguistic community of deaf and hard of hearing community.

Lithuanian sign language is not the same as Lithuanian language. This fact can sound confusing, but it is. Lithuanian sign language has its own unique grammatical structure. Not all Lithuanian words has their signs. Some words can be translated in two or three different signs. In sign language there are no suffixes or prefixes, no prepositions. When speaking sign language a person uses space around him to show where something is instead of using prepositions such as “under”, “over”, “in front of” or “behind”. Also it is a common myth that sign language works in the same way as Braille alphabet – one can translate or just write Lithuanian in Braille. Sign language is an independent language. It means that Lithuanian written language for the deaf community is as foreign language to a hearing person. And to read in Lithuanian for them is the same as to read in English or German or Russian or any other foreign language to us. It is possible, but it is a bit harder. And this is reason why sometimes libraries for deaf people are inaccessible fortress.

However, this situation is changing. Libraries have started to provide services for deaf and hard of hearing recently. In 1991, IFLA has confirmed guidelines for working with the deaf and hard of hearing community<sup>1</sup>. These guidelines provide suggestions such as: 1. library staff should receive training focusing on the issues involved in providing services to the deaf community; 2. all library staff should receive training in how to communicate effectively with deaf people; 3. libraries should attempt to employ persons who have or are likely to be able to obtain credibility within the deaf community and so on. Deaf community is very reserved and private. Libraries have to put a lot of effort to get deaf community involved into library and libraries' services. It is important to cooperate with associations of the deaf community. Public library should become a welcoming place for the deaf people, a place for new knowledge, for integration into society and culture, and a place where others could learn about the needs of deaf community. But how can we achieve this goal? And where to start?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/hq/publications/professional-report/62.pdf>

In 2013, only five adults with hearing disability were using Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library. But librarians have noticed this target group and decided to start cooperating with the Vilnius County Sign Language Interpreters Centre. The first project was translating library events, such as book discussions, meetings with authors and so on, into sign language. In 2014, library has started to make books' recommendations in sign language. Librarians have prepared video material where sign language interpreter were presenting a specific book in sign language. These videos were uploaded to libraries YouTube channel, and shown on the screens in the reading rooms.

In 2017, we have started a new idea – to create a video guide for the deaf children. The idea behind it was that sometimes it is very hard and confusing to find what you are looking for in a library. But when you are able to communicate you can just ask. For the deaf people and especially children it is so much harder. So this video guide can help a deaf person to feel more comfortable in our library.

Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library is under reconstruction for about 12 years. And the first part where reconstruction has finished is children's library. So we decided to start there. What does it mean to make a video guide? It means to really think about your library, your libraries' spaces and services from other perspective. Children's library consist from eight different spaces. Some of them are open and connected with each other, some of them are not. All spaces are designed for different purposes, different age groups and so on. So first of all we had to prepare small – one paragraph long – texts about these spaces. What kind of services can you get here, how can you find a specific book, how these computers, or self-service machine works, and so on. All these texts were discussed with sign language specialist. Sometimes there is no sign for some word, or maybe it can have a different meaning. It is very important to ensure that the idea in Lithuanian language would be translatable into Lithuanian sign language.

The next step was to make a route. Where to start, which information is most important and should be said first, what route would be most convenient to deaf children. Also all spaces had to be marked with special sign language signs. It was important to make sure it would not disturb the whole design of children's library.

So when the route was clear and the texts were prepared, the filming of the videos could start. There are twelve separate videos that make video guide for the deaf. All videos are filmed separately; the frame is adjusted to the needs of the deaf people. It means that there is no motion; the hand of the translator is clearly visible. These videos were integrated into one mobile application. All videos have their own unique numbers. The same numbers are on the special signs on the walls in the library spaces. This app is integrated into tablets that are comfortable for the children to carry

around. Additional information is presented in special posters. If a deaf child is lost or don't understand something, he can chose and show his "problem" from the list on the poster to a librarian.

So in conclusion what are our results right now? There are 20 deaf library users and this number is slowly increasing. From 2013 until 2017 there were about 200 deaf people in various library events. Vilnius County Adomas Mickevičius Public Library has started to cooperate with new organizations working with deaf and hard of hearing community. We are really hoping that public library can become a welcoming space instead of an inaccessible fortress for this community.