Policy Brief

Establishing a National Center for Sign Language Interpretation: Ensuring Equitable Access to Healthcare Services for Persons with Hearing Disabilities in Jordan

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Executive Summary:

In Jordan, persons with hearing disabilities face significant challenges in accessing healthcare services due to the absence of effective communication methods with healthcare providers.

Field studies and observations highlight a substantial gap in delivering comprehensive healthcare services tailored to persons with hearing disabilities. This gap stems from the lack of sign language interpretation services between healthcare providers and persons with hearing disabilities, compromising their right to receive healthcare services that ensure the confidentiality of their information.

Data indicates that a significant proportion of persons with hearing disabilities struggle with inadequate communication with healthcare providers. This results in difficulties expressing their health conditions, and understanding medical diagnoses, treatment procedures, and implications.

Currently, persons with hearing disabilities largely rely on family members or friends to communicate with physicians and service providers. This reliance imposes an additional burden on patients and compromises their privacy, particularly in cases that require confidentiality.

Despite attempts to provide sign language interpretation services through electronic applications in certain healthcare institutions, these efforts remain insufficient. Interviews with healthcare providers revealed that they had not received official instructions on how to utilize such technologies. Furthermore, medical staff lack the necessary training to communicate effectively with persons with hearing disabilities.

The absence of sign language interpretation services also delays the provision of appropriate healthcare. In many emergency cases, persons with hearing disabilities are unable to accurately describe their medical conditions, putting their lives at risk. The lack of specialized sign language interpreters forces patients to leave healthcare facilities without receiving a proper diagnosis or treatment, exacerbating their physical and mental health conditions.

This issue reflects a significant challenge in implementing the provisions of the 2017 Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which mandates the provision of reasonable accommodations to ensure access to healthcare services for persons with disabilities. It also constitutes a violation of the principles of justice and equality enshrined in international agreements, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Given these circumstances, there is an urgent need to establish a Specialized National Call Center to provide sign language interpretation services around the clock for persons with hearing disabilities visiting any public or private healthcare facility.

This Center could address the current gap and ensure effective communication between persons with hearing disabilities and healthcare providers, safeguarding their independence and privacy. Additionally, it is essential to train healthcare personnel in utilizing these services to ensure comprehensive and equitable care for all citizens.

Introduction:

As part of the effort to improve the quality of healthcare services for persons with disabilities and ensure the respect of their rights, the "Ebni" campaign conducted a study in 2024 to assess the reality of sexual and reproductive health services provided to girls with disabilities at comprehensive healthcare centers.

The study's results revealed significant gaps in providing reasonable accommodations, highlighting that girls with hearing disabilities face challenges in accessing healthcare services due to the complete absence of sign language interpretation services at the study sample centers (42 comprehensive healthcare centers). This lack of communication support hinders effective interaction between persons with hearing disabilities and healthcare staff, leading to violations of their healthcare rights, especially in situations requiring a high degree of confidentiality.

The study also showed that healthcare providers, including female doctors, nurses, and licensed midwives, had not received any training on methods and means of dealing with persons with disabilities. This increases the challenges faced by persons with disabilities in accessing appropriate care.

The study also revealed a unique initiative by the staff at the Mafraq Health Center, which introduced sign language interpretation services through a local volunteer interpreter. According to the head nurse at the center, this service is offered voluntarily by a community member.

To develop and scale this innovative initiative, which the center team implemented due to their recognition of its urgent need, this policy brief highlights the necessity of establishing a "Specialized National Call Center to provide sign language interpretation services around the clock for persons with hearing disabilities visiting any public or private healthcare institution."

Persons with Disabilities in Jordan:

According to the General Population and Housing Census 2015 issued by the Department of Statistics (DOS), the number of persons with disabilities in Jordan aged five and older is approximately 1.4 million, with 249,000 of them having hearing disabilities.

The report further indicates that 189,000 of the persons with hearing disabilities are Jordanian citizens over the age of five, underscoring the urgent need to develop inclusive, non-discriminatory policies, including the right to accessible and independent healthcare services.

Legal and Regulatory Framework:

The right to access healthcare services is a fundamental right guaranteed under national legislation and international agreements. In this context, the Disability Rights Law No. “20” of 2017 in Jordan, alongside Article 25 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Jordan in 2008, ensures the rights of persons with disabilities to access comprehensive and equitable healthcare services.

Article 23 of the Disability Rights Law outlines a set of obligations for the Ministry of Health and relevant authorities:

Article 23:

A. Including the accessibility requirements for persons with disabilities to health services, pharmaceutical and nutritional information in relevant policies, strategies, plans, and programs.

B. Providing reasonable accommodations, accessible formats, and ensuring accessibility in hospitals and their affiliated medical centers, and requiring non-governmental hospitals and medical centers to provide such accommodations as a condition for granting and renewing their licenses.

C. Rectifying the conditions of hospitals and medical centers that were established and licensed before the enactment of this law, within a period not exceeding five years from its effective date, according to procedures defined by the Minister of Health.

D. Training and preparing medical, technical, and administrative staff working in hospitals and medical centers, in coordination with the Council, on methods and means of communication with persons with disabilities. This training aims to ensure informed consent and access to healthcare services and programs.

E. Designing and implementing early detection programs for disabilities at maternal and child health centers, hospitals, and comprehensive health centers, as well as multidisciplinary diagnostic programs for persons with disabilities, providing services that prevent the exacerbation of their disabilities and associated health conditions.

F. Providing and licensing occupational therapy programs in accordance with regulations issued by the Minister of Health for this purpose.

G. Training specialized staff on methods for identifying cases of physical and psychological violence and abuse, and on how to handle such cases.

H. Providing reasonable accommodations and accessible formats to ensure full access for women with disabilities to reproductive health services and programs.

I. Providing pharmaceutical, nutritional, and health information in accessible formats for persons with disabilities.

Reviewing Article 23 of the Disability Rights Law clearly underscores the Ministry of Health's obligation to incorporate accessibility requirements in all of its plans and programs, ensuring the removal of barriers for persons with disabilities and providing reasonable accommodations in public and private healthcare facilities. One of the most prominent accommodations is sign language interpretation for persons with hearing disabilities, ensuring their independent access to healthcare services.

Furthermore, Article 25 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affirms the right of persons with disabilities to enjoy the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination. The state parties, including Jordan, are obligated to take necessary measures to ensure:

- **The provision of healthcare services free of charge or at an affordable cost, which are comparable in scope and quality to those provided to others.**
- **The prohibition of any form of discrimination in the provision of healthcare.**

Despite these clear legislative provisions, persons with disabilities in Jordan, particularly those with hearing disabilities, face significant challenges that hinder their enjoyment of these rights. These challenges include the lack of reasonable accommodations and the inaccessibility of sign language interpretation services. As a result, the quality of services provided to them is compromised due to the inability of healthcare staff to effectively communicate with persons with hearing disabilities.

These challenges deprive persons with disabilities of their right to receive healthcare services that ensure their informed consent and the confidentiality of the care they receive.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Good Health and Well-being

The current challenges faced by persons with hearing disabilities, such as the lack of effective communication with healthcare providers, conflict with the essence of SDG 3, which calls for achieving universal health coverage and providing access to safe and effective medicines and vaccines for all.

The proposed solution, establishing a National Call Center for Sign Language Interpretation, represents a strategic step toward supporting the achievement of this goal. It provides an innovative platform that ensures persons with hearing disabilities can access healthcare services with dignity and independence. Additionally, this solution enhances Jordan's capacity to fulfill its responsibilities toward achieving sustainable development by improving the quality and inclusivity of healthcare services, contributing to the creation of a healthy and equitable society for all.

Current Situation and Challenges:

Persons with hearing disabilities face significant obstacles in accessing healthcare services in a manner that ensures their independence and dignity. These challenges include difficulties in obtaining clear medical information in sign language, hindering their ability to provide informed consent and accurately communicate their health conditions or discuss treatment options effectively.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

Persons with hearing disabilities are often compelled to rely on family members or friends as companions during healthcare visits. While this arrangement aims to facilitate communication with medical staff, it raises multiple issues. Patients may feel embarrassed to disclose sensitive health information in the presence of companions, resulting in incomplete information provided to physicians and subsequently impacting diagnosis and treatment quality. Additionally, companions may overstep their role by interfering in treatment decisions, contrary to the patient's wishes, thus violating their right to make health-related decisions autonomously.

Moreover, many healthcare providers lack adequate training in interacting with persons with hearing disabilities or understanding their needs. This, coupled with the absence of assistive tools such as sign language interpreters or technological communication aids, exacerbates feelings of exclusion and diminishes their opportunities for equitable healthcare access.

Pharmaceutical Information:

Communication challenges extend to pharmacies, where persons with hearing disabilities struggle to understand medication usage instructions accurately. The inability of pharmacy staff to communicate in sign language often forces patients to guess the instructions or seek assistance from others, exposing them to the risks of improper medication use.

In cases where no companion is available to assist in translation, persons with hearing disabilities bear the sole responsibility for understanding medication instructions. This situation compromises treatment accuracy and effectiveness, potentially leading to serious health complications due to improper medication use or incorrect adherence to prescribed dosages.

Emergency Situations:

One of the most critical scenarios for persons with hearing disabilities is the urgent need for medical care during emergencies without a companion to assist in communicating with healthcare staff. In such situations, patients may be unable to convey their health conditions or symptoms accurately and promptly, resulting in delays in diagnosis or inappropriate treatment decisions.

For example, in cases of heart attacks, accidents, or other critical conditions, time is a crucial factor in saving lives. The absence of effective communication methods with medical staff can lead to wasted time necessary for rapid intervention. Such delays may worsen the patient's condition or place their life at significant risk.

Healthcare institutions must therefore be equipped to handle these emergencies and routine visits by persons with hearing disabilities, ensuring their access to appropriate medical care.

Writing as a Communication Tool is Ineffective:

During interviews conducted for a study evaluating healthcare services for persons with disabilities, several healthcare providers reported relying on writing to communicate with persons with hearing disabilities.

Language development is among the most impacted areas for those with hearing disabilities. Studies indicate that linguistic proficiency diminishes with the severity of hearing loss, leading to significant weaknesses in linguistic skills. Children with hearing disabilities face challenges in acquiring grammatical rules and developing reading and writing skills in the written language structure.

These linguistic challenges in reading and writing limit their ability to express themselves accurately and clearly, particularly when dealing with complex concepts or describing health-related details.

Relying on writing as the primary communication method neglects the critical relationship between the severity of hearing loss and the depth of linguistic challenges, rendering it an ineffective solution to bridging the communication gap between persons with hearing disabilities and healthcare providers.

Proposal: Establishing a National Call Center for Sign Language Interpretation

To enhance the independent access of persons with hearing disabilities to healthcare services and ensure their right to effective communication, it is proposed to establish a National Call Center for Sign Language Interpretation. The Center aims to provide real-time sign language interpretation services around the clock for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, enabling them to interact with healthcare institutions and access necessary medical services with dignity and autonomy.

1. Project Components:

Digital Platform (Mobile Application):

A dedicated application that allows persons with hearing disabilities to make video calls with sign language interpreters who facilitate communication between beneficiaries and healthcare entities.

2. Specialized Interpreters:

A team of sign language interpreters, accredited by the Higher Council for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, provides high-quality real-time interpretation services while ensuring user privacy and confidentiality.

3. Comprehensive Services:

The Center will provide a range of services, including:

- Sign language interpretation between patients and healthcare providers.
- Sign language interpretation in pharmacies.
- Guidance to healthcare institutions based on the required service.
- General inquiries and medical consultations.
- Reporting health emergencies.
- Receiving complaints and suggestions.

4. Integration with Healthcare Institutions:

The Center connects healthcare institutions through a unified digital system, ensuring seamless access to services for persons with hearing disabilities, while providing training for medical staff on utilizing the system effectively.

5. Application Launch:

Developing an application compatible with various operating systems (iOS and Android), ensuring user-friendly design and fast service access.

Expected Impact:

Safeguarding the right of persons with hearing disabilities to access healthcare services with dignity and autonomy.

Strengthening communication between healthcare providers and beneficiaries to enhance the quality of medical care.

Mitigating risks of delays or inaccuracies in diagnosis and treatment arising from the lack of effective communication mechanisms.

Proposed Partnerships:

The project requires collaboration among government entities, such as the Ministry of Health, the private sector, and civil society organizations, to ensure adequate funding and sustainable operations. Additionally, the expertise of the Public Security Directorate (PSD) can be leveraged, given its experience in developing an emergency communication system for persons with hearing disabilities.

Costs and Funding:

- **Costs for Establishing the Center:**
- **Development of the digital infrastructure.**
- **Recruitment of staff.**
- **Allocation of a designated space within a Ministry of Health facility.**
- **Operational costs of the Center.**

Funding Sources:

- **Government funding from the Ministry of Health's budget.**
- **Partnerships with international organizations and donors, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and Handicap International (HI).**

Recommendations:

1 Legislation:

- **Issue directives from the Minister of Health to establish a "National Call Center for Sign Language Interpretation " within the Ministry.**
- **Create a functional structure for the Center, with the recruitment of qualified sign language interpreters, ensuring interpreting coverage is provided 24/7 through scheduled shifts.**
- **Launch a tender for the development of the digital platform.**

2. Awareness:

- **Conduct awareness campaigns to promote sign language interpretation services among persons with disabilities and healthcare providers.**

3. Evaluation:

- **Periodically assess the Center's impact on improving access to and quality of healthcare services.**
- **Monitor the number of persons with hearing disabilities using the communication system.**
- **Track the increase in visits by persons with hearing disabilities to public healthcare facilities.**

Conclusion:

The establishment of the National Call Center for Sign Language Interpretation is a pivotal step toward achieving justice and inclusivity in providing healthcare services to persons with hearing disabilities. By offering effective and advanced communication tools, it ensures they can access the healthcare they need independently and safely, without relying on companions or worrying about communication with medical staff.

This Center represents the Ministry of Health's commitment to achieving equality and implementing the provisions of the Disability Rights Law by incorporating accessibility requirements in all its plans and programs, ensuring the removal of barriers for persons with disabilities to access healthcare services.

This Center will mark a qualitative shift in the field of disability rights, positively impacting the quality of their healthcare lives and ensuring their rights to access healthcare services that befit them.


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