National Disability Center for Student Success

Campus Accessibility Spotlight Series

Accessible Emergency Communication and Safety

Published: October 30, 2026 | Jonathan M. Davis, MA, CPWIC, ACRE



GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY

Introduction: The Institutional Challenge

This Campus Accessibility Spotlight focuses on emergency communication and safety accessibility at Gallaudet University, the world's premier university for Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard-of-hearing students.

It examines how visual communication systems, ASL-centered communication strategies, accessible emergency preparedness planning, and inclusive campus safety practices contribute to a more accessible campus environment. Insights from this spotlight may help other institutions rethink emergency preparedness through a universal design and disability-centric lens.

Note: The term Deaf (with capital D) refers to individuals who identify with Deaf culture, a linguistic and cultural community centered on shared experiences, values, and language such as American Sign Language (ASL). In contrast, deaf (with a lowercase d) generally refers to the audiological condition of hearing loss without necessarily implying cultural identification. These distinctions recognize that deafness encompasses diverse linguistic, cultural, and individual experiences.

Why Accessible Emergency Communication Systems on Campus?

Demographics and Accessibility Factors

- Gallaudet University serves a predominantly Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard-of-hearing student population, making accessible emergency communication essential rather than supplemental.

- Emergency information must be communicated through email and text so that students with different communication, sensory, and accessibility needs can quickly receive and understand critical information.

- DeafBlind students may face additional barriers when emergency alerts solely rely on visual communication.

- 100% of public entities covered by Title II of the ADA are required to take appropriate steps to ensure that communications with people with disabilities are as effective as communications with others. This requirement is particularly relevant to emergency communication and accessible alerts.

Source: 28 C.F.R. § 35.160 (2024).

Institutional Benefits

- Accessible emergency communication strengthens campus preparedness, safety, and trust.

- Examining current practice can help identify opportunities to improve emergency notification systems, policies, training, and coordination across campus departments.

- Findings can inform practices that may serve as a model for other colleges and universities seeking to improve emergency preparedness and accessibility.

Community Impact

- Effective emergency preparedness and communication can reduce uncertainty and help Deaf/DeafBlind/Deaf with additional disabilities, and hard-of-hearing students, faculty, staff, and visitors make informed decisions during emergencies.

- Centering the experiences of the Gallaudet community helps ensure that emergency preparedness reflects the lived experiences of the people directly affected.



Meet the People

Students and leaders involved in emergency communications at Gallaudet University were interviewed by the National Disability Center about their work to clarify and standardize preparation and evacuation accommodations. Those interviewed were:



Jonathan M. Davis, MA, CPWIC, ACRE

Doctoral Student

Role: Conducts qualitative research on emergency communication, campus safety, and accessibility, drawing on professional expertise and lived experience as a Deaf student. His research examines how communication systems and emergency preparedness can better align to support an accessible campus environment.



Julie Ann Shoeman, MSW, MPA

Doctoral Student

Founder and Executive Director, DREAMWAVE

Advocates Movement Alliance, Inc.

Role: Focuses on systems advocacy, accessibility, and communication access, drawing on professional and advocacy experience to examine how emergency communication systems create different levels of access for Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard-of-hearing individuals.



Victorica Monroe, PhD

Adjunct Faculty, Department of Education

Role: Focuses on the educational access and communication needs of the DeafBlind community, drawing on scholarly expertise and lived experience as a DeafBlind student alum, scholar, and educator.



John Nassif, MS, CEM, MEP, NRP

Emergency Operations Manager

Role: Leads the development and implementation of the University's emergency management program, including the Gallaudet Emergency Management System (GEMS). His work focuses on accessible emergency preparedness, response, coordination, and recovery for the Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, and hard-of-hearing community.

By the Numbers

1,325

Students enrolled at Gallaudet University in Fall 2025

976

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students enrolled at Gallaudet University in Fall 2025

8

Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard-of-hearing university students in a 2026 U.S. earthquake early-warning study

Sources: Gallaudet University (2026), Common Data Set 2025–2026; Gallaudet University, Office of Institutional Research (2025), Fall 2025 Enrollment Tables; Cooper et al. (2026), International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 137, 106095.

Implementation Activities

Implement the Emergency Support Functions (ESF) Framework

Gallaudet University is working to implement this ESF framework within its revised Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), committing coordinated functional responsibilities for emergency campus preparedness, response, and recovery across Gallaudet, Clerc Center, Kellogg Conference Center, and broader campus community. The tenets of the framework, aligned to dedicated emergency operational functions, are communication, facilities, emergency management, housing, mass care, interpretation services, and health & medical support as well as overall to be accessible for campus community members.

Strengthen Multimodal Emergency Communication

Current practices rely on English-based written communication and need to move beyond that by implementing accessible communication methods, including ASL, visual alerts, text messaging, emails, captioning, and other accessible formats. A Deaf participant specifically identified the need to make emergency communication less English-centric and more responsive to the linguistic needs of the Gallaudet community.

Improve Accessible Fire and Emergency Alerts

Participant experiences identified gaps in how residential fire emergencies including fire drills and false fire alarms are notified. A DeafBlind participant reported that a dorm staff member entered their room to provide notification of a fire alarm due to lack of receiving alert via text or email. This highlights the need for emergency notification systems that can reduce the physical necessity of a staff member reaching an individual inside a dorm room.

Develop Accessible Evacuation Information

Emergency preparedness should include evacuation maps and wayfinding materials that are accessible to DeafBlind community members on the campus such as tactile and Braille formats. A participant identified the absence of tactile/Braille evacuation maps as an accessibility gap.

Integrate Accessibility Throughout Emergency Preparedness

The revised EOP emphasizes accessibility and inclusion as part of emergency operations and management rather than a separated discussion. Its framework pinpoints the necessity of ASL integration, explicit communication, inclusive planning, accessible tools and technology as components of emergency preparedness.

Fresh Insights

> Emergency alerts must reach people directly rather than relying on someone physically entering their room.
>
> Victorica Monroe, PhD 

Emergency communications should incorporate ASL rather than relying predominantly on English. For example, international students on Gallaudet campus who are learning English may rely on ASL to understand what is necessary for awareness.

Gallaudet University Staff Member

Emergency communication plays a role, although certainly for Deaf and Hard of Hearing sighted people, the impact is less than for DeafBlind people.

Julie Ann Shoeman, MSW, MPA



Emergency preparedness is a collective responsibility. It requires collaboration across the University so that everyone understands their role and can contribute to a coordinated response.



John Nassif, MS, CEM, MEP, NRP

Unexpected Revelations



Gallaudet is accessible for DHH students but still has significant gaps in accessible emergency communications

Although Gallaudet is a Deaf-centered environment, this does not automatically mean that all emergency systems meet the diverse communication needs of the campus community.



Emergency accessibility goes beyond receiving an alert

Effective communication involving emergencies must ensure that Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard-of-hearing students can understand the information, determine what actions need to be taken, and access timely guidance throughout an emergency.



Instead of expecting individuals to adapt to it, the solution is to change the emergency system itself

The findings highlight the importance of examining how emergency preparedness, procedures, communication methods, and institutional practices can be redesigned to support access in equitable ways.

What a Student Says

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I chose this project because campus accessibility is about more than meeting compliance requirements. It is about ensuring that Deaf, DeafBlind, and hard-of-hearing students can fully participate in campus life and access critical information, especially during emergencies. Through this research, I hope to identify practical strategies that help Gallaudet University and other institutions create safer, more inclusive, and accessible campus environments.

Jonathan M. Davis, MA, CPWIC, ACRE

Strategies for Success on Your Campus

1. Establish Clear Emergency Communication Protocols

Develop and regularly review procedures using multiple accessible channels, including visual alerts, text messages, email, and captioned videos.

2. Integrate Accessibility from the Start

Incorporate accessibility considerations into emergency preparedness, response, and recovery plans from the start, instead of treating accessibility as an add-on after the plan is developed.

3. Train Faculty, Staff, and Emergency Personnel

Use practical scenarios to prepare campus personnel to communicate effectively with individuals with disabilities during emergencies.

4. Develop Multiple Emergency Communication Pathways

Offer accessible options for receiving alerts and reporting safety concerns such as text messages, mobile apps, websites, email and in-person, without relying on a single communication system.

5. Engage Students with Disabilities

Include students with disabilities and disability organizations in creating, testing, and updating campus emergency plans. Their firsthand experiences can reveal obstacles that administrators and emergency planners might overlook.

6. Strengthen Cross-Campus Partnerships

Establish regular collaboration among emergency management, public safety, disability/accessibility services, IT, student affairs, facilities, and communication taskforce.

7. Conduct Accessible Emergency Drills

Integrate accessibility into regular emergency drills instead of holding separate exercises solely for students with disabilities.

8. Allocate Resources Exclusively for Accessibility

Allocate funds for accessible technologies, staff training, interpreting and captioning services, visual alert systems, and communication infrastructure in emergency preparedness budgets.

9. Evaluate Emergency Communication Systems Frequently

Gather feedback from students, employees, campus safety staff, and other stakeholders after drills or real emergencies.

10. Develop Collective Responsibility for Campus Accessibility

Treat emergency accessibility as a shared responsibility throughout the whole institution, instead of isolating it to disability services or individual students.





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