

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – March 15 – 19, 2010

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Which are the only two states in the United States that recognize ASL as a the natural language of Deaf people?

- a. New York and California
- b. Maine and Alabama
- c. Oregon and Washington
- d. Kansas and Wyoming

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: While approximately 45 states in the United States recognize ASL as a language, typically these laws are written within the context of accepting ASL as a language that may be studied for credit in schools. These laws primarily benefit hearing students by offering hearing students insights into the Deaf community and culture and potential future careers working with the Deaf community as teachers, interpreters, counselors etc.

Given the history of oppression of Deaf people and their language it is understandable but unfortunate that laws have to be written to “recognize that ASL is a language and may be taught in schools.” While we may “celebrate” that ASL is finally recognized fairly broadly as a language, these laws only indirectly benefit Deaf and hard of hearing children. These laws haven’t, for example, had direct impact on the human right of Deaf infants to be provided with access to ASL from birth. Many Deaf infants are still deprived of access to ASL as the only fully comprehensible, natural human language during their early formative years. This practice results in unnecessary disability and delay in language, cognitive and social-emotional development for many Deaf and hard of hearing children.

Only two states Maine and Alabama actually recognize ASL as the natural language of Deaf people following the declarations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities to which the United States finally became a signatory in July, 2009. [Source: Presentation of Dr. Tim Reagan, Professor of Educational Leadership, Central Connecticut State University, at the 2010 CAEBER Conference, March 10-13, 2010]

According to the World Federation of the Deaf:

The UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities specifically states that governments are to recognize sign language as an official language in the Constitution and/or special legislation, ensure professional interpreter services, and guarantee education to deaf people in their sign language.

The WFD also states that, "The Convention also aims at better ensuring the right of Deaf people to be educated in sign language, use sign language in official interaction with authorities, promote access to interpreters and receive services as well as information in sign language. In addition, it includes the recognition and support of cultural and linguistic identity."

Note: The United States has not yet recognized ASL at the federal level as the natural language of the Deaf community.