



# An Evaluation of Barrier Free Living's Deaf Services Program

## Interim Findings

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*November 2021*

More than 11 million people in the United States are Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, or Deaf-Blind.<sup>1</sup> In the New York metropolitan area alone, more than 240,000 people report a hearing-related disability.<sup>2</sup> Research indicates deaf people report experiencing victimization at higher rates,<sup>\*</sup> but a lack of accessible resources and trauma-informed services for American Sign Language (ASL) speakers makes it difficult for deaf people to report crimes and access support (Anderson and Leigh 2011; Pollard, Sutter, and Cerulli 2014).<sup>3</sup> In response to these issues, the District Attorney of New York County (DANY) has provided funding to support Barrier Free Living's (BFL's) Deaf Services (DS) program, with the goal of increasing access to direct services for domestic violence survivors who are deaf and increasing local stakeholders' awareness of deaf survivors' needs.<sup>†</sup> In 2019, DANY funded the Urban Institute to conduct, in

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<sup>\*</sup> Lowercase deaf is typically used to refer to the physical condition of having limited or no hearing, whereas uppercase Deaf refers to deaf people who identify as belonging to the linguistic/cultural community that uses American Sign Language as its primary language. Except when referring specifically to Deaf culture, for purposes of inclusivity and simplicity, we use deaf in this brief to refer to people who are Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, or Deaf-Blind.

<sup>†</sup> In the victim services field, victim is typically used in a criminal justice context and/or to refer to someone who has recently experienced violence, whereas survivor is often used to refer to someone who is going through or has gone through the recovery process. Consistent with the language used by BFL, we use survivor in this brief to refer to people who have experienced domestic violence.

collaboration with Gallaudet University, a rigorous process evaluation of BFL's DS program. In this brief, we present the interim findings from our evaluation.<sup>4</sup>

## Barrier Free Living's Deaf Services Program

For nearly 40 years, BFL has provided services and advocacy in New York City for survivors of domestic violence with a range of disabilities, including hearing impairments. It provides services through three overarching programs: Freedom House, Secret Garden, and BFL Apartments. **Freedom House** is a domestic violence shelter offering stays of 90 to 180 days to families and single women and men. The shelter is fully accessible to, and its apartments are equipped to accommodate, wheelchair users, people who are deaf, and people who are blind or visually impaired, although people need not have a disability to stay there. Residents have access to social workers, counselors, case managers, occupational therapists, emergency child care, and family services. **Secret Garden** is BFL's nonresidential domestic violence program that provides counseling, support groups, advocacy, safety planning, and case management to survivors. Most recently, **BFL Apartments** opened in 2015 to offer permanent housing to survivors of domestic violence with disabilities. In addition to housing and direct services for consumers,<sup>5</sup> BFL conducts training and advocacy to improve services across New York City for survivors of domestic violence with disabilities.

Since 2017, DANY has provided funding to BFL through its Criminal Justice Investment Initiative to increase access to direct services for survivors of crime who are deaf and to improve the city's ability to meet deaf survivors' needs. Internally, BFL's DS program seeks to increase the number of deaf and ASL-fluent direct service staff at Freedom House and Secret Garden, which makes case management and counseling services more culturally and linguistically appropriate for deaf survivors. The DS program aims to train BFL's hearing staff more on ASL and Deaf culture, streamline use of interpreters for deaf staff and consumers, and improve communication and information sharing with the deaf community and between BFL staff and consumers. Externally, the program creates opportunities to conduct outreach and trainings with and for the deaf community, service providers, and law enforcement and other criminal justice actors.

In 2019, DANY awarded a 34-month contract through a competitive solicitation to the Urban Institute to conduct, in collaboration with Gallaudet University,<sup>6</sup> a multimethod process evaluation of BFL's DS program.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the evaluation is to document the implementation of the DS program and assess whether it achieves its intended goals. More specifically, the evaluation is intended to (1) help us understand the factors that impede or support the implementation of enhanced services for deaf survivors, (2) assess how DS consumers perceive their experiences with the DS program and staff, (3) provide insight on BFL staff communication and collaboration around services provided to deaf clients, and (4) examine BFL's collaboration and engagement with community service partners on issues related to deaf survivors.

In this brief, we summarize interim findings pertaining to the research questions guiding the process evaluation of BFL's DS program. These findings rely on data collected between October 2019 and

January 2021. The research questions and methodology used for this evaluation are provided in box 1. Findings from the evaluation will be released in a final report in summer 2022.

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## BOX 1

### Research Questions and Data Sources for Our Evaluation of Barrier Free Living's Deaf Services Program

The following six major research questions are guiding this study:

- How is the DS program serving deaf survivors?
- How does DS increase BFL's ability to effectively communicate with deaf survivors?
- How does DS increase staff communication and collaboration around services provided to deaf clients?
- How does DS increase community service providers' knowledge of deaf survivors' needs and services?
- What are consumers' perceptions of the DS program?
- What factors impede or support the implementation of enhanced services (i.e., the DS program) for deaf survivors?

We are relying on the following data sources for this study:

- *Interviews with BFL staff, community partners, and DS program consumers.* We have conducted 31 interviews, including 11 with BFL leadership and staff, 5 with community service providers with whom BFL frequently works, and 15 with DS program consumers. Twelve of the DS consumers we have interviewed self-reported as cisgender women, 2 self-reported as cisgender men, and one self-reported as nonbinary. Regarding race and ethnicity, 5 are Black or African American, 3 are Hispanic or Latino/a, 3 are white/Caucasian, and 4 are another race or multiracial. All of the consumers we interviewed were older than 30 at the time of the interviews, and 5 immigrated to the United States from another country.
- *An online survey of DS program consumers.* We received survey responses from nine DS program consumers. All consumers identified as female. Two identified as Black or African American, two as white, and two as Hispanic or Latino/a; three chose not to disclose their race/ethnicity. All consumers were older than 30.
- *BFL program data.* We received quarterly performance data submitted by BFL to the Institute for State and Local Governance since 2018. As of June 2020, the DS program had served 55 consumers. Forty-six deaf consumers had received services through Secret Garden, and nine had received services through Freedom House. Twenty-one consumers were already engaged with the DS program when it received Criminal Justice Investment Initiative funding, and 34 more began receiving services after BFL received that funding.

## How the DS Program Serves Deaf Survivors

Consumers are most likely to be referred to BFL by organizations that support survivors of interpersonal violence and communities and families in need. The consumers we have interviewed for this study most often indicated having learned about BFL's services through referrals from other agencies. Several reported having attempted to access other services before being introduced to BFL, but they were unsuccessful or had difficulties because the provider was not accessible to or knowledgeable about working with deaf people.

Consumers seek services from BFL's DS program to address difficulties associated with abuse and the effects of abuse. Many consumers reported experiencing mental health challenges, such as depression and isolation, as a result of abuse. Several are parents who have had challenges associated with security and establishing a safe environment for themselves and their children. In addition, consumers reported needing help establishing financial security, finding new housing, obtaining food stamps, and navigating court cases and legal issues, such as child support, divorce, and immigration.

At BFL I learned what domestic violence is. I learned coping strategies, like how to communicate better with my children. I learned how to deal with my controlling mother. I had real dependency issues. While I was at Freedom House, I got involved with the domestic violence group and had one-on-one meetings with the deaf social worker. The domestic violence group has been great because I'm learning from other people's experiences as well. I'm learning about the situations that they've been through. I'm really garnering strength from them and their stories. I'm learning that it's important for me to take a stand. —BFL consumer

The BFL services DS consumers most frequently reported receiving were counseling and legal services. More than half of the consumers we interviewed reported participating in the counseling services offered by a deaf social worker at BFL. Consumers reported using that time to discuss the effects of abuse on their lives as well as other challenges, such as depression, homelessness, parenting issues, and financial strain. Nine consumers reporting receiving legal assistance through the DS program. This included assistance obtaining legal separation or divorce from abusive spouses/partners.

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# How DS Increases BFL’s Ability to Effectively Communicate with Deaf Survivors

**Barrier Free Living requires all staff to complete an ASL course.** Key goals for the DS program include making BFL more accessible to ASL speakers and offering trainings on issues pertinent to the deaf community. To achieve these goals, BFL has used DS funding to provide a six-week ASL course that all BFL staff, including case managers, social workers, occupational therapists, and administrative and front-desk staff, are required to take. Staff can also take additional ASL classes and trainings, although uptake of these opportunities has been relatively low.

**Interpreters are regularly used in staff meetings, consumer workshops, and interactions between consumers and staff.** To ensure interpreters are present when needed, BFL has used funding to implement clearer processes for scheduling (such as by clarifying who is in charge of scheduling in each situation), train management staff to request interpreters, and preschedule interpreters for recurring meetings. As a result, it has relieved deaf staff of the burden of scheduling interpreters for their meetings with staff and consumers. One BFL staff member articulated, “I think having a deaf services team here has really invited us to do better and deeper work around communication access. We are way more intentional and well versed in how we schedule interpreters and how we follow up with deaf consumers around their experience of having worked with interpreters, if necessary.”

**The Criminal Justice Investment Initiative grant has enabled BFL to improve its communications technology.** Barrier Free Living has been able to purchase tablets to support video remote interpreting, which helps facilitate conversations between deaf consumers and hearing staff. During initial screenings, staff use videophones as needed to help them determine people’s eligibility for Secret Garden and Freedom House services. In addition, BFL created a separate visual hotline with an ASL-signed menu that deaf people can use to reach members of the DS team rather than the traditional voice hotline that hearing survivors use. Lastly, it upgraded the accessibility kits in each Freedom House unit to include deaf-accessible blinking lights for the doorbell and vibrating alert systems.

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## How DS Increases Staff Communication and Collaboration around Services for Deaf Consumers

**Deaf staff are now more integrated in BFL services.** Before receiving funding from DANY, deaf DS case managers and social workers only provided services at Secret Garden. The grant funds have enabled these staff to serve consumers at both Freedom House and Secret Garden. According to interviewees, this staffing change supports better communication between consumers and DS staff at Freedom House, and facilitates collaboration around services across BFL's programs. From a trauma-informed lens, it is particularly beneficial for consumers who leave Freedom House and continue services at Secret Garden to not have to disclose their stories again and develop new relationships.

I do think having a program that fits at both Freedom House and Secret Garden helps foster collaboration because there's a lot of communication that needs to happen about clients that are being referred back and forth. [For example,] somebody who's at Secret Garden and who needs shelter, so how can we get them into shelter? Or they're leaving shelter, let's make sure they're continuing to get services. I think that's been a good model that we're really trying to continue to expand on. —BFL staff

**Barrier Free Living staff are more aware of deaf people's needs.** Deaf Services staff provide periodic in-house trainings to hearing staff across all BFL programs on topics such as deaf communication, Deaf culture, and the intersection of domestic violence and disabilities. Along with the increased number of deaf staff, these trainings have increased awareness across BFL programs and staffing positions, including upper management, about the needs of deaf people.

## How DS Increases Community Service Providers' Knowledge of the Needs of and Services for Deaf Survivors

**Barrier Free Living conducts outreach and provides training to community service providers on how to best work with deaf people.** The DS program's goals include increasing outreach to organizations and the deaf community in New York City, and providing more trainings on Deaf culture, particularly to disability-focused service organizations and victim service agencies that interact with deaf people. Barrier Free Living has incorporated information about deaf survivors and services in all of its broader community outreach, but it also conducts advocacy specific to the deaf population. According to BFL program data, DS staff conducted more than 100 outreach activities to agencies across the city, facilitated more than 30 workshops, and presented at conferences and community meetings between January 2018 and June 2020. Advocacy efforts have included developing and adapting [NYC Well](#), a free citywide mental health hotline, and the [Text-to-911](#) program to help deaf people reach emergency services.

**Barrier Free Living works closely with community service providers to ensure deaf people receive appropriate services.** It fills a distinct and significant gap by being the only program in the New York City area to work with survivors of domestic violence who have disabilities. One community partner told us, “BFL is the only [domestic violence] agency that provides deaf services to deaf individuals, so if you take that away, there’s nothing left. They know how to get and provide interpreters, appropriate ones that match the clients’ needs.” All the community service providers we interviewed have worked closely with BFL to provide wraparound services as needed by providing case management and other services to survivors. Multiple providers highlighted strong communication, trust, and confidentiality as important to the success of collaboration on individual cases.

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*BFL is the only [domestic violence] agency that provides deaf services to deaf individuals, so if you take that away, there’s nothing left. –Community partner*

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## How Consumers Perceive the DS Program

**Deaf Services consumers reported positive experiences with the program.** All survey respondents and the majority of interviewees reported positive experiences with BFL and the services received through the DS program. Services offered through the DS program have helped consumers learn a lot about themselves and how to lead better lives. They also expressed appreciation in the survey and interviews for the diversity of services that BFL offers. However, 4 of the 15 interviewees (26 percent) expressed dissatisfaction with BFL’s location (for instance, that it is inconvenient or unsafe) and/or services (for instance, issues with interpreters, follow up, or type of services offered).

**Consumers reported positive relationships with BFL staff.** Consumers especially appreciated having a deaf social worker and a signing case manager. As one consumer told us, “The fact that I’m deaf and that [the social worker] is deaf really helps with communication. I have had other instances when it was difficult to communicate with people, but with [the social worker], it is so clear and easy to understand. I trusted the [social worker] with my confidentiality.” Consumers indicated they felt comfortable because communication was clear and they understood everything that was explained to them. They also had access to interpreters at BFL, unlike their experiences at other agencies. Because of this communication access, consumers indicated they were able to develop trust and have confidence in their case managers and social workers, and felt as if the staff understood their situations.

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## Factors That Impede or Support the Implementation of Enhanced Services for Deaf Survivors

**Factors that support enhanced services for deaf survivors include institutionalized and ongoing staff training around deaf communication and culture, strong collaboration and communication between staff at all levels, the consistent use of interpreters, and supportive partnerships with community organizations.** Barrier Free Living staff and community service providers highlighted the need to provide ongoing staff training, including ASL instruction and trainings on Deaf culture. One BFL staff member who discussed the trainings told us, “We had to get through a lot of hard conversations and allow space for people to just be honest ... Yes, there was a cultural shift, and I truly do think it was because of the trainings.” Respondents emphasized the importance of activities that facilitate interactions between staff at all levels of the organization, and they consider integrated working spaces that incorporate deaf-friendly technology important to promoting a sense of team building, collaboration, and communication among hearing, nonhearing, and senior and more junior staff. In addition, BFL staff and partners underscored the need for organizations that may provide services to deaf clients to set aside money for interpreters and for technology to facilitate communication with their clients. They also highlighted the importance of building strong collaborations across community agencies to provide the services deaf people need.

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*–BFL staff member*

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**Factors that impede the provision of enhanced services for deaf survivors include the lack of sufficient funding, the need to sustain programs implemented with time-restricted grant money, staff turnover, and difficulties finding qualified deaf staff.** Barrier Free Living staff and community providers said that consistent and sufficient funding for providing accessible services to deaf people is lacking, and they noted that challenges associated with sustaining services and supports beyond grant funding are impediments to providing enhanced services for deaf people. In addition, BFL staff and community service providers noted that communication between hearing and nonhearing staff about roles, expectations, and program and funding requirements may pose challenges if ample space and time are

not provided to support consensus building and understanding among a team. Moreover, staffing has frequently been a challenge at BFL: turnover among hearing staff requires retraining in ASL and Deaf culture, and turnover among deaf staff leaves gaps in services and heavy caseloads for remaining DS staff. Barrier Free Living planned to create an occupational therapy group for deaf consumers but could not find a qualified deaf therapist.

**There is a lack of services for deaf people across New York City.** Staff and partners highlighted significant gaps in deaf services across the city that make it difficult to refer deaf people to the services they need. Respondents noted the lack of short- and long-term housing, deaf therapists, services for children, services for deaf people who cause harm, and trauma therapy with interpreters in the community. Resources are needed to fund more agencies to provide services to deaf people and to hire deaf staff, ASL-fluent staff, and/or qualified interpreters to communicate with deaf people.

**The COVID-19 pandemic has been an unforeseen barrier to providing enhanced services to deaf survivors.** Like other service providers, BFL ceased in-person meetings between staff and consumers in March 2020 and began to rely primarily on videophone meetings with consumers, which was a familiar way of communicating for consumers but presented challenges around confidentiality and safety. After the onset of the pandemic, consumers and staff both anticipated and planned for increased videophone use. Moreover, the DS team has ceased internal staff trainings and in-person community outreach and trainings, although it recently began offering virtual trainings.

## Preliminary Recommendations

Through our interviews with BFL staff, consumers, and partners, we have produced recommendations for how BFL can improve and adapt its staffing, services, and outreach. The following recommendations may also inform the work of other funders and providers seeking to serve deaf survivors:

- Hire additional deaf staff to increase capacity to provide services to deaf survivors and to ensure someone is always present to communicate with deaf consumers when they reach out to BFL for services or enter BFL offices.
- Continue to train hearing staff on deaf issues, Deaf culture, and resources available to deaf consumers in the community.
- Use the same interpreters throughout a deaf consumer's engagement for continuity of services and to eliminate the need for consumers to repeatedly provide interpreters contextual or background information.
- Increase the number of locations offering BFL's deaf services throughout New York City.
- Continue to increase and diversify the types of services and trainings available to deaf consumers, including services for children, legal and financial workshops, and tailored services for subpopulations within the deaf community (e.g., deaf survivors who are Orthodox Jewish, people who are Deaf-Blind, and immigrants).

- Identify additional avenues to inform the deaf community about BFL to raise awareness about its services and to increase trust that services are deaf-friendly.
- Increase the number of trainings on Deaf culture and domestic violence in the deaf community, and diversify the types of trainings available to community members and professional organizations, such as law enforcement agencies and medical providers.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> 2019 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, US Census Bureau, accessed October 15, 2021, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=hard%20of%20hearing&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1810>.
- <sup>2</sup> 2019 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, US Census Bureau, accessed October 15, 2021, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=hard%20of%20hearing&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1810>.
- <sup>3</sup> 2019 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, US Census Bureau, accessed October 15, 2021, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=hard%20of%20hearing&tid=ACSST1Y2019.S1810>.
- <sup>4</sup> See our blog on the methodological considerations and lessons learned from this study on *Urban Wire* at <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/strategies-including-deaf-and-hard-hearing-participants-research>.
- <sup>5</sup> Barrier Free Living refers to people who receive services or otherwise interact with its program as “consumers.”
- <sup>6</sup> Gallaudet is a bilingual college for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in Washington, DC, that offers intellectual instruction and professional advancement in ASL and English.
- <sup>7</sup> The City University of New York’s Institute for State and Local Governance has managed the evaluation on behalf of DANY.

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## Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by the District Attorney of New York grant award number 2017-11160. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at [urban.org/fundingprinciples](http://urban.org/fundingprinciples).



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