

Communication is Fundamental to #HealthCareEquality**April 1, 2019**

James is a kind and caring single father who moved to Knoxville, Tennessee to be closer to his young son. James is also profoundly deaf and communicates primarily in American Sign Language (ASL) as opposed to written or spoken English. **In September of 2017, James underwent a life-threatening cardiac bypass surgery at a local hospital.** James requested that staff at the hospital provide him with an on-site, qualified sign language interpreter, so that he could understand what was happening to him. Unfortunately, the hospital did not provide James with a sign language interpreter. As a result, James was not able to ask questions or express concerns about his pain, symptoms, medical history, and more. **For five days, James had no interpreter and no idea of the severity of his condition.** “I felt completely shut out,” James says of the



DRT Client Story: James

experience. "I felt closed off – like I was completely isolated without any communication. I had no idea what was going on. Communication would have opened up everything for me."

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Under the ADA and other federal laws, hospitals are legally required to provide effective communication that is equal to the communication provided to all other patients. When a hospital failed to provide James with sign language interpreters before, during, and after his cardiac surgery, DRT filed a lawsuit. James and DRT have pursued this legal advocacy to ensure that *all* people with disabilities are given effective communication about their health care.

"A hospital cannot treat someone differently because they are deaf," explains Stacie Price, Disability Rights Tennessee (DRT) Attorney. "Hospital staff must communicate critical healthcare information to a deaf patient just like they would a hearing patient. A deaf person should not have to go into cardiac bypass surgery without having even the most basic information about what is happening to them. Can you imagine a doctor using only hand gestures to explain the risks of open heart surgery? That is what happened to James. He was treated differently because he is deaf, and that is *not* acceptable."

Summary: James is deaf and a single father. He had to have heart surgery and went to the hospital. Because he could not talk with the doctor, he did not know what was happening. The hospital did not get him a sign language interpreter. He had to have surgery and did not know what was happening. Afterward, he called DRT because he had felt shut out. DRT is working to teach the hospital their responsibilities under the law.