



The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) presented draft themes and goals for the 2022-2027 NIDCD Strategic Plan for public comment from May 2 – May 31, 2022. The LSA submitted the following comments in response.

LSA Response to NIDCD Strategic Plan Draft

The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) is the largest professional organization of linguists in the United States. Our members conduct scientific research related to language, with a wide representation of languages under study, including natural sign languages of deaf communities. In 2001, the society officially recognized the linguistic status of natural sign languages and affirmed for them all the rights and privileges attendant to spoken languages. Scholarly presentations on sign languages, including plenary addresses, have been made at our annual meetings for decades.

We note that while many deaf and hard of hearing children, adolescents and adults use a spoken language (such as English), many of them also use (or prefer to use) a natural sign language, such as American Sign Language. Research on sign languages is necessary to understand the scope of communication practices of deaf and hard of hearing people; sign language research also plays an important role in understanding and supporting the language development (signed or spoken) of deaf children. For these reasons, it is important to *increase* the already insufficient amount of research that is conducted in the U.S. on sign languages. Moreover, in order to improve care, including healthcare, for deaf and hard of hearing persons, the nature and efficacy of sign language for early intervention and education requires much further study.

We therefore **object** to the eradication of natural sign languages from the 2022-2027 NIDCD Strategic Plan Draft. Without mention of sign languages in the Strategic Plan, this necessary research will be reduced rather than increased. We **strongly recommend** the inclusion of goals such as the following from the current strategic plan:

- Sign Language Research: Investigate the acquisition, processing, and neural underpinnings of sign languages.

It is imperative to note that natural sign languages are imminently accessible for deaf and hard of hearing infants and children, and may be acquired as a natural language before it is possible to pursue the kinds of interventions that may make spoken language accessible (hearing interventions are not, however, guaranteed to work, reinforcing the need for sign language research). Without greater study of the acquisition of a sign language in such contexts, there is a risk that young children will continue to experience language deprivation syndrome and suffer its long-lasting consequences.

We are also stunned to see that there is no mention of literacy or education in the Draft. Given that literacy skills transfer across languages, continuing research on the development of literacy by deaf and hard of hearing children is crucial. It is both necessary and important to recognize and understand the ways in which development of literacy differs for children based on whether they are using a spoken language, a sign language, or both.

We therefore recommend the inclusion of goals such as the following from the current strategic plan:

- Literacy and Deafness: Identify central and peripheral factors associated with the successful comprehension and use of written language for people who use sign language as their primary way of communication.

In summary, since the NIDCD's "vision is to advance the science of communication to improve lives", then the Institute must prioritize research that has measurable and material impacts on the public health outcomes of deaf and hard of hearing people: language and equitable education. Thus, as the largest organization representing scholars from across the language sciences, the LSA urges the NIDCD to revise the proposed strategic plan so that these two integral parts of deaf health continue to receive the support they deserve if we are to move forward as a healthier nation, for everyone.