

How You Can be a Communication Access Hero Panel

Jim Rau, Dr. Tina Childress, Robin Jones

In this panel discussion, three experts, Jim Rau, Dr. Tina Childress, and Robin Jones, shed light on the challenges and opportunities in improving hearing accessibility within the healthcare sector. Drawing from their experiences and expertise, they discussed various aspects ranging from personal anecdotes to legal frameworks and practical strategies for advocating for better accessibility. Here's a comprehensive summary of the insightful dialogue:

Jim Rau: A Veteran's Journey

Jim Rau, a veteran receiving services through the VA, shared a personal story illustrating the challenges faced by individuals with hearing loss in accessing healthcare. He recounted experiences with audiologists, particularly during remote appointments, where he struggled with hearing aid adjustments due to a lack of appropriate accommodations such as captioning. During his first appointment, Jim described using telehealth for a remote hearing aid adjustment. When the provider took control of the hearing aids, he lost the ability to hear the audiologist; however, captions were provided, so it was a smooth, accessible experience. Two years later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the VA's interface for remote appointments changed and did NOT provide captions. Therefore, his audiology appointment was inaccessible and unsuccessful. The issue with the proprietary interface lacking captioning ability has yet to be remedied, highlighting significant ongoing issues with basic accessibility of services for our vets.

Dr. Tina Childress: Educating for Accessibility

Dr. Tina Childress shared a story where she was teaching a class focused on healthcare accessibility. In one assignment to learn more about how healthcare entities provide accommodations, students called medical providers to ask about their accommodations. Two students called the same location and got completely different answers! This highlighted the lack of training and awareness in these types of settings. Dr. Childress emphasized the importance of proactive communication and self-advocacy, encouraging us to familiarize ourselves with our rights and articulate our needs clearly. Dr. Childress also stressed the significance of bringing personal tools for accessibility to appointments and leveraging resources like cell phone automated captioning apps.

Robin Jones: Navigating Legal Frameworks

Robin Jones delved into the legal landscape surrounding healthcare accessibility, outlining key laws such as Section 504, ADA, and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). She emphasized that these laws mandate healthcare providers to ensure effective communication for individuals with disabilities, including the provision of auxiliary aids and services. Jones highlighted the importance of understanding state and local laws, advocating for stricter enforcement, and utilizing resources for filing complaints when necessary.

Ensuring Effective Communication

Throughout the discussion, there was a recurring theme of ensuring effective communication. The panelists stressed the importance of healthcare providers offering preferred modes of communication and avoiding blanket excuses for not providing accommodations. They emphasized that laws mandate individualized accommodations and encouraged us to advocate for ourselves in requesting necessary aids and services. An important point was if you are in a situation where someone could request an interpreter, you can request CART real time captioning.

Practical Strategies and Tools

The panelists provided practical strategies and tools for improving accessibility, including:

- Utilizing speech-to-text applications. There may be some resistance by the healthcare professionals to you using your phone captioning app, citing HIPAA compliance. A patient using his/her own phone with his/her speech to text app during the appointment is not a violation of HIPAA nor a provider compliance issue. The provider is not in violation of HIPAA because it is the patient's decision to use their own device for captioning.
- Avoiding yes/no questions when requesting accommodations. Make your request more of a statement. Instead of saying, "Can I have captions so I can understand?" (and yes/no question), say, "I need captions so I can understand what you're saying."
- Documenting accommodation requests and advocating for reasonable timelines.
- Engaging with advocacy organizations and seeking legal assistance when needed.

Moving Forward: Advocacy and Action

In concluding remarks, the panelists highlighted the importance of continued advocacy and action to improve healthcare accessibility. They encouraged us to familiarize ourselves with relevant laws, engage in self-advocacy, and utilize available resources

for support. By advocating for your rights and holding healthcare providers accountable, we can contribute to creating a more inclusive healthcare environment for all.