

The Deaf of Panama The Panamanian Sign Language Community

Deaf Panamanians often feel oppressed and discriminated against. Disability laws have been made but they have not assisted the Panamanian deaf community as much as they have benefited other disabled groups. Many deaf Panamanians are not aware of the opportunities they are missing because of the lack of communication and knowledge of what is happening in the hearing world around them. Deaf people want the opportunity to learn and become independent.

Image Unavailable

The majority of deaf students are integrated into hearing classrooms with little or no signing. They believe that clear communication will provide them access to a better life. Because of this, there is a desire for schools to be conducted in Panamanian Sign Language or the provision of educational interpreters. There is also a great need for interpreters in other public services such as courts, hospitals, media, etc. Currently, interpreters are hard to find in Panama and they are unaffordable to deaf Panamanians.

It is difficult for deaf Panamanians to find jobs, unless they are literate in Spanish and able to voice. Most often they work in factories where communication is not required. Religion of any sort does not appear to be adhered to by many deaf Panamanians. Deaf people socialize mostly on weekends in local malls or central parks. Panama City and David have the largest deaf communities. There is a fair amount of interaction between deaf people in Costa Rica, the USA and Panama which gives reason to the idea that Panamanian Sign Language is related to Costa Rican Sign Language and American Sign Language. An interesting note is that the deaf community in Chiriquí province believe they are culturally and linguistically distinct from the rest of Panama.

The greatest needs mentioned in the deaf community are for more Panamanian Sign Language publications and access to better education for deaf people. There is also the need to train parents how to help their deaf children.

Primary Religion:

Christianity

Disciples (Matt 28:19):

Almost none

Churches:

1

Scripture Status (Matt 28:20):

None

Population (date):

5000-6000 (2009)



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Have They Heard the Gospel?

Hindrances to Scripture Use

There are no portions of Scripture available in the mother-tongue of deaf Panamanians. Most deaf Panamanians do not understand the importance of the Bible so they do not see the need for having one. There are very few deaf Christians.

Response to the Gospel

The church among the deaf community is almost non-existent. Local deaf people have reported that missionaries have come in the past to evangelize but when they leave, nothing continues. There is only one deaf-led church that exists in Colon which is considered a very dangerous city in Panama. Deaf Panamanians would probably be open to learn about God if someone could share with them in their heart language.

Bilingualism

Bilingualism in Panamanian Sign Language and Spanish is only found among the well educated or hard of hearing community. Limited education access results in low Spanish literacy among the deaf population

Are Cross-Cultural Missionaries Needed?

Cross-cultural missionaries could be helpful in church planting since there is only one known deaf church and one church with an interpreted service. The Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons have a strong presence in Panama deaf community. Cross-cultural missionaries could assist in training educator of deaf children. There is also a need for a Spanish literacy program for deaf people.

Number of Christian Congregations Serving Group

1

Number of Congregation Using Primarily Local Language

1

Language of Outside Communication or Trade

Spanish

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Group Description

Geographical/Environmental

Climate Tropical, rainy season (May-January) dry season (January-May)

Language/Linguistics

Attitude towards mother tongue

Very receptive

Second Languages

Spanish (written)

Other mother tongues of this group

Spanish

Others speaking this language as MT

Deaf people who were raised orally (focus on speech and lip-reading) and hearing children of signing deaf adults

Linguistically related

Chiriquí Sign Language and possibly to American Sign Language and Costa Rican Sign Language

Neighbor Languages

Spanish

Literacy

Adult Literacy

92% Spanish literacy for general population but much lower for deaf population

Literacy Attitude

Somewhat receptive

Active Program

None

Publications in MT

Dictionary, CD, children's alphabet book

Comments

Many deaf Panamanians would like to learn more Spanish so they can have better access to life

Economics

Average. Annual Income

\$11,700 for general population and much lower for the deaf population

Unemployment Rate

5.6 % of general population and much higher for deaf population

Occupation

Carpentry, dentistry, factory, tailors, clerical and self-employed

Modernization/Utilities

The majority of deaf Panamanians have access to very modern items (including internet café's equipped with web cameras) depending on their financial status. Most have cell phones for texting.

Community Development

Clothing

Western style

Transportation

Walking and public transportation

Infant Mortality Rate

12.67 deaths/1,000 live births

Life Expectancy

77 yrs.

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Society

Family Structures	Deaf people often stay with family because they cannot afford their own housing or are not allowed to be independent; women tend to stay in the home and do not have many social opportunities.
Social Habits/Groupings	Deaf groups tend to form by location
Identification with National Culture	Integrated though many may feel oppressed by the hearing community
Self Image	Threatened
Attitude to Outsiders	Somewhat receptive
Attitude to Change	Somewhat receptive
Cultural Change Pace	Medium
Local Lang Broadcasting	20 min. to 1 hour daily of interpreter in small area of TV screen

Education/Youth

Primary Schools	All deaf students are mainstreamed with hearing students and most often with no extra assistance
Primary School Enrollment	About 700
Language of Instruction	Spanish
Language of Textbooks	Spanish
Unmixed Schools	None
Problems/Needs	Deaf teens need more interpreters so they can have access to education; they need to feel a sense of acceptance in the hearing community; they need an advisor with whom they can communicate clearly

Religion

Number of Adherents	Catholic 95%; Other 5%
Primary Religion	Christianity
Comments	The above percentages are statistics for the general hearing population since there are none available for the deaf population

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Status of Christianity

Church Growth

Total Believers	Almost none
Pastors	1
Churches	1

History of Christianity in Group

Year Began	Late 1980's
By Whom	Lesbia Villarreal, hearing interpreter at Comunidad Apostólica Hosanna but deaf ministry closed in 2009

Scripture/Literature/Media

Translation Status	Definite need
Available Scripture	None
Hindrances to Distribution	There are no portions of Scripture available in the mother-tongue of deaf Panamanians. Most deaf Panamanians do not understand the importance of the Bible so they do not see the need for having one. There are very few deaf Christians.

Missions/Churches Working

Among People Group

Organization #1	Deaf church in Colon
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Responsiveness

Attitude to Christianity	Somewhat indifferent
Attitude to Religious Change	Somewhat indifferent
Spiritual Climate and Openness	They are unaware of what God can do for them.
Ways to Approach the Group	Through Panamanian Sign Language. Deaf people are able to reach deaf Panamanians more easily than hearing people who have little connection to a deaf community.
Current Needs	Access to education in sign language, interpreters, sign language materials, Bible in their heart language.
Items for Prayers	Pray for Panamanians to learn about Christ in their heart language. Pray that people will be moved to share God's love with them and give them a hope for their future. Pray that God will empower the few deaf Panamanian Christians and give them courage to share what they know. Pray that God will reveal Himself to them.