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'Please don't overlook our needs amid pandemic'

by Riley Kennedy, RNZ

AUCKLAND — The National Foundation for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NFDHH) is concerned that people with hearing loss are being discriminated against and having their needs overlooked amid the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.



National Foundation for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (NFDHH) chief executive **Natasha Gallardo**.
Picture supplied

The organisation has teamed up with Deaf Aotearoa to urgently lobby the Government, ministers and the Ministry of Health to ensure inclusion of the deaf and hard of hearing communities in its approach to Covid-19.

NFDHH chief executive Natasha Gallardo said the communities were overlooked in the first lockdown and nothing had changed.

"We are still here asking to be listened to. It is really disappointing," she said.

NFDHH and Deaf Aotearoa have sent letters to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and senior ministers Carmel Sepuloni and Kris Faafoi, outlining their concern.

Ms Gallardo acknowledged the Government's recommendation to use face masks was imperative to help stop the spread of the virus, but she believed it presented a major barrier

for the people who relied on lip reading in order to communicate with others.

"As well as this, the outside of prime-time news bulletins are not required to have closed captions, so they fail to meet the needs of the deaf," she said.

NFDHH were warning that the repercussions could include:

- A reluctance for those who are deaf to get tested, as they may not understand conversations or instructions;
- The potential for that audience to miss important information in news conferences; and
- Feelings of isolation and marginalisation, which could have an effect on their mental health.

Ms Gallardo said NFDHH was calling on the Government for closed captions for all Covid-19 briefing sessions on media-run platforms, New Zealand Sign Language interpreters at testing stations and captions in places where public-service announcements were played.

"Social distancing makes hearing harder, even without wearing masks," she said.

"Many of the hard-of-hearing community are becoming more anxious when confronted by someone wearing a mask, watching news reports and not knowing what is happening."

More needed to be done to include them in mainstream communications and services during the pandemic, Ms Gallardo insisted.