

02 June 2026

C212527

H Barakat

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Tēnā koe H Barakat

Thank you for your request of 29 March 2026 to the Department of Corrections – Ara Poutama Aotearoa, requesting information about deaf/mute/hard of hearing prisoners. Your request has been considered under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA).

I would like to acknowledge the delay in responding to your request for information under the OIA. We always aim to adhere to legislative timeframes and I apologise that we have not been able to do so on this occasion.

People often enter prison with significant health, disability, mental health, and addiction needs. We are committed to providing people with specific support to meet these needs as we help them to address the causes of their offending, improve their wellbeing, and safely reintegrate back into their communities. People generally come into prison bearing pre-existing disabilities, but some people may also develop a disability while in prison. In prison, high-quality health and disability support services are critical in addressing inequitable health and wellbeing outcomes and in ensuring continuity of care when reintegrating back into the community.

Corrections' Disability Action Plan gives effect to our domestic and international obligations and works to address the significant need for improvements for disabled people. It is available on our website, at:

<https://www.corrections.govt.nz/resources/strategic-reports/disability-action-plan-2023-2027>

One of the four immediate actions of the Disability Action Plan includes incorporating the Washington Group Short Set of Questions (WGSSQ) on Disability into health screening tools. Information from the WGSSQ is helping to inform our understanding of the functional needs of people in prison, such as people who identify as deaf or hearing impaired. This information will be utilised to inform future planning, supports and resources to better meet the needs of all disabled people. By addressing people's needs sooner, they are more likely to have better outcomes, which helps reduce the likelihood of reoffending once a person has left prison. The WGSSQ may be replaced in time by an improved screening mechanism that would be designed specifically for New Zealand circumstances.

When a person enters prison, they undergo an Initial Health Assessment (IHA). The IHA is a comprehensive health assessment designed to explore the person's health history and presenting conditions, elicit the persons ongoing health needs, and develop a plan for the care and treatment of their needs in prison. Identifying any disabilities is a minimum component of an IHA and includes identifying assistance needs and any aids required.

Additionally, people in prison can receive funding for hearing aid services. A person in prison with complex needs is eligible for the Ministry of Health's Hearing Aid Subsidy Scheme, which funds up to \$511 per ear. Furthermore, Corrections will cover the costs of hearing aids of up to \$3,000 if there are no options for payments by the person in our management or their family.

Your requests are addressed in turn below. Please note that some of your questions have been combined for ease of response. You requested:

1. *How many deaf/hard of hearing prisoners have there been in your prisons in the last 5 years?*

When a disability is identified in a prisoner that is important for their management, it is entered into the Integrated Offender Management System (IOMS) by custodial staff, and/or our patient management system (MedTech) by health staff as an alert.

For the purposes of answering your request we are releasing IOMS alert figures, however an alert might separately be noted on a person's prison medical file (MedTech records). There are likely to be a small number of cases where an alert was noted on a person's MedTech records, which would be entered by health staff, but this did not translate to a corresponding alert on the person's IOMS profile, which would be entered by custodial staff. However, we are releasing the IOMS alert figures to you as they most accurately capture both of the categories you are interested in.

In IOMS, alerts such as "Deaf" and "Hearing Problems" would require a manual review to determine the nature and extent of hearing or communication needs (e.g. deaf in one or more ears, use of hearing aids or cochlear implants, or non-speaking).

Please see the below table which outlines the number of distinct patients with Deaf and Hearing Alert in IOMS for the past five years. Please note that the prison population changes on a daily basis due to court decisions and scheduled releases. We can provide figures based on a snapshot of the prison population as at 30 June each year.

Data Source	Alert Type	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
IOMS	Deaf	8	5	4	7	16
IOMS	Hearing Problems	7	4	22	20	20

Please note the following limitations with the data provided:

- The “Deaf” alert is not used exclusively for the deaf community. It may also include people with unilateral hearing loss, partial hearing impairment, or those who are hard of hearing. In practice, individuals with partial hearing loss are sometimes recorded under the “Deaf” alert rather than the “Hearing” alert.
- This group may include people who use cochlear implants or hearing aids. As a result, the data is indicative only and does not provide an exact or comprehensive representation of the deaf population.

2. How many mute prisoners have there been in your prisons in the last 5 years?

3. How many deaf/hard of hearing and mute prisoners have there been in your prisons in the last 5 years?

There is no specific alert in IOMS or MedTech to identify mute prisoners.

This type of information is recorded within people’s individual files, and to collate this information would require the manual review of each file. While the prison population has fluctuated over the last five years, Corrections currently manages more than 11,000 people in prison. Therefore, these parts of your request are refused in accordance with section 18(f) of the OIA, as the information requested cannot be made available without no substantial collation or research.

As per section 18B of the OIA, we have considered whether consulting with you would enable the request to be made in a form that would remove the reason for the refusal. However, we do not consider that the request can be refined in this instance, and we have already provided you with the data we are able to in Question one.

4. What is the protocol regarding communication with deaf and mute prisoners? How are they alerted re lockdowns/fires/emergencies? How are they notified about meal times?

People in prison are managed according to their individual circumstances and needs. As mentioned previously, when a person arrives in prison, they have an Initial Health Assessment, at which point they can report they have a hearing impairment. Custodial staff also will induct the person into the prison and explain the emergency procedures.

Although induction processes may vary between prisons, as an example, during the induction process at Rimutaka Prison this conversation can be tailored for a person with the hearing impairment. They are informed that in the event of an emergency they can press the emergency button in their cell, get the attention of staff or other prisoners, or approach the guardroom if possible.

Prisoners are also notified that they will be regularly monitored via CCTV footage, staff walking around the unit and welfare checks, which allow staff to recognise emergency situations quickly. If additional needs are recognised, the prisoner and staff work together to create an individual plan to ensure that they are able to be safely managed in emergency situations and be made aware of mealtimes. In relation to the part of your question that

asks about mealtimes, please note that a significant proportion of units serve prisoners meals in their cells.

5. How many prison guards are fluent in NZSL in prisons and which prisoners do they work at?

The information you have requested does not currently exist in a form that can be readily supplied to you and would instead require Corrections to initiate a project to extract, analyse and present the data in the form requested. Therefore, this part of your request is refused under section 18(g) of the OIA, as the information requested is not held by Corrections, and we have no grounds for believing that it is held by another agency or more closely connected with the functions of another agency.

6. Is there someone on site at all times able to communicate with hard of hearing, deaf and/or mute prisoners? What prisoners is this available at?

Currently, interpreters can be requested as needed via our service provider, iSign through Deaf Aotearoa. iSign interpreters are available for engagement between our staff and people in prison when required at critical times, including initial contact, pre-sentence/PAC interviews, New Zealand Parole Board interviews, legal meetings and when discussing health needs. When a prisoner is known to be deaf, an interpreter is requested by default. You can find out more about their services at the following link:

<https://www.deaf.org.nz/what-we-do/isign/>

7. What is the protocol for a prisoner who is hard of hearing, deaf or mute suffering a medical episode? Can you please also specify how they would signal to Corrections of such an event?

All cells have a call button, which allow prisoners to alert staff to an issue. Although there is no specialised response to medical episodes for deaf prisoners, people are managed according to their individual needs, including cases where staff are aware that the prisoner is deaf, hard of hearing and/or mute. If staff are aware that a prisoner may not say anything when the call button is pressed, staff may instead go to their cell. Additionally deaf prisoners who have functional literacy may choose to utilise whiteboards for communication.

8. How would prisons communicate with/interact with prisoners that have low literacy, and are mute and deaf?

Corrections manages a complex population of prisoners, including those with low literacy and dyslexia. Therefore, custodial staff are encouraged to spend additional time explaining written documents.

One of the short-term actions (2024-2027) in our Disability Action Plan is Corrections staff having resourcing for, and access to, learning NZ Sign Language (NZSL). At present, Corrections staff and deaf or hearing-impaired people in prison can access New Zealand Sign Language translation services on request. We have developed and released New Zealand

Sign Language (NZSL), te Reo Māori, Easy Read, large print and pictorial versions of the Disability Action Plan to ensure the plan is accessible to all disabled people.

9. How many deaf, mute and/or hard of hearing prisoners have died in custody in New Zealand in the last 5 years?

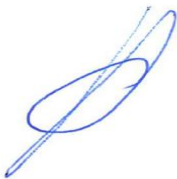
As noted in the response to Question One, we can provide figures relating to people in prison with a “Deaf” or “Hard of Hearing” alert on their IOMS profile or Medtech records.

None of the people included in the table provided in response to Question One have died in custody.

Please note that this response may be published on Corrections’ website. Typically, responses are published quarterly or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

If you have any concerns with this response, we encourage you to raise them with Corrections. Alternatively, you have the right to make a complaint to the Ombudsman. Information about how to do this is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or by contacting them on 0800 802 602 or by post to the Office of the Ombudsman, PO Box 10152, Wellington 6143.

Ngā mihi



Leigh Marsh
Deputy Chief Executive
Pae Ora