# Emergency broadcasts and Auslan interpreters

Imagine watching an emergency broadcast when you are unable to understand what is being said. If you can’t understand what is happening, then you will not have access to important, possibly life saving information.

This is a situation that Deaf Australians who are Auslan users may experience when watching emergency broadcasts when an Auslan interpreter, who is present at the emergency press conference, is cut out of the broadcast. Auslan is the first and often preferred language for many Deaf Australians. It is estimated that there are more than 10,000 Australians who use Auslan as their preferred[[1]](#endnote-1) [[2]](#endnote-2) language.

During emergency situations, such as the recent South Australian Bushfires, Auslan users rely on interpreters being present in broadcasts to access this important information. In these emergency broadcasts, it is imperative that Auslan interpreters are shown on the screen.

However, during broadcasts of information about the SA Bushfires on 26 November, 2015, ABC’s morning news, Channel Nine’s Today Show and Channel Seven’s Sunrise, cropped the Auslan interpreters out of the screen, effectively cutting off access to this important information for Auslan users.

While captions are useful for people who are hard-of-hearing and those who use English as their primary language, they're not necessarily helpful to Deaf people. Many Deaf Australians who use Auslan as their primary language often find it difficult to comprehend complex messages being conveyed because of the different language structures between English and Auslan.

It is not a legislative[[3]](#endnote-3) requirement for the TV broadcasters to include Auslan interpreters in frame when they are present, however ACCAN and Deaf Australia assert that the interpreters are present to ensure that all Australians have access to important information and therefore it is incumbent on the broadcasters to ensure that the interpreters are included in their broadcasts. This is especially important as we approach the bush fire season. Our families, friends and communities are all safer when everyone has access to important emergency and disaster information.

ACCAN and Deaf Australia expect that when an event or press conference being covered on a news program includes an Auslan interpreter, then the interpreter should be shown on screen. During coverage of the one year anniversary of the Sydney Siege in Martin Place on 15 December 2015, ABC News 24 also cropped the Auslan interpreters out of the frame during their broadcast.

If free-to-air news was broadcast without sound there would be outrage from the community. We should be equally outraged when important news and information is possible but not made available through poor broadcasting practice.

ACCAN will be monitoring this issue over the upcoming 2016 bush fire season. If you see an emergency broadcast on a news program where the Auslan interpreter is cropped out of the screen please let us know about it by emailing [Auslan@accan.org.au](mailto:Auslan@accan.org.au) or calling ACCAN Disability Policy Adviser, Wayne Hawkins, through the NRS Video Relay Service on 02 9288 4000 (during business hours).

1. Census 2011 reported 9,723 Auslan users. However Deaf Australia estimates that the number is higher given that some Auslan users may not understand written English and are unable to complete census documents correctly. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Also, see 2013 Deaf Society NSW publication <http://deafsocietynsw.org.au/documents/The_distribution_of_the_signing_population_NSW_2013.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The BROADCASTING SERVICES ACT 1992 - SECT 130ZZB Emergency Warnings requires free-to-air television broadcasters to;(a) transmit the whole of the emergency warning in: (i) the form of text; and (ii) the form of speech; and (b) If it is reasonably practicable to do so--provide a captioning service for the emergency warning. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)