

## **David Bitters – One Man's Mission**

David Bitters began to lose his hearing at the age of 3 and has worn hearing aids since age 9. Although profoundly deaf, he now hears well due to bilateral cochlear implants received as an adult. He communicates well orally and also knows American Sign Language. Educated in Pittsburgh public schools, he went on to earn degrees from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, NY. An engineer by trade, he was employed by IBM for 20 years, and upon retirement relocated to Columbia, SC.

In the aftermath of the October 2015 floods and the 2016 Department of Justice judgment against the city of Columbia for several violations involving a deaf individual, he became aware of the need for greater communication between police and firefighters with the deaf and hard of hearing communities. Despite Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, the rights of deaf people were often violated. Mr. Bitters then offered himself as a consultant/trainer to local fire and police departments. He teaches such skills as how to recognize that a person is deaf, how to approach them, and how and when the use of a sign language interpreter is necessary. He demonstrates basic communication skills with people who have hearing loss, and describes how communication with someone who is deaf is very different from using standard English grammar. He sees the world as one community, and his desire is to provide additional training to help first responders on their jobs. To date, he has taught classes to over 200 police officers and 35 fire fighters in the Irmo/Columbia area, has appeared in a training video for the City of Columbia, conducted a person-to-person training with the Lexington County Sheriff, is currently teaching classes in Rock Hill, and is scheduled to teach for Aiken Public Safety and the Town of Lexington in Spring 2017. He has also reached out to a couple of other public safety departments in the state and is awaiting their response.

In addition, Mr. Bitters acquired the design for a car visor communication card used by several other states and adapted it to fit police and driver needs in South Carolina. These cards are now being made available to the deaf and hard of hearing communities as an aid in communicating with police officers. In April 2016 he founded the Midlands Chapter of the Hearing Loss Association of America and is currently serving as its first president. The more he conducts training classes, the greater his awareness becomes of the need for truly incorporating deaf and hard of hearing individuals into the community and providing a safe means for deaf and first responder communication. His ambition is to eventually extend his training to the entire state of South Carolina. From a personal hearing loss has grown a greater awareness of the needs of others and a mission to change how the deaf and hard of hearing communicate and interact with law enforcement and other public safety officers.