

# Working with Sign Language Interpreters for Events

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Communication access is essential to any event, but especially those with Deaf or hard of hearing participants. Most events with Deaf or hard of hearing participants achieve effective communication through the help of qualified sign language interpreters. Choosing qualified interpreters—who are able to interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially, and who are familiar with the content and terminology of your event—helps the event’s host meet the legal requirement for accessibility. It also allows everyone—Deaf and hearing participants, presenters, and staff—to communicate and engage with one another fully and, ultimately, to contribute to and learn from the experience.

This tip sheet provides information to help you meet your legal obligations for communication access and to create an inclusive and equitable experience for Deaf participants.

## American Sign Language and Interpreting 101

In order to effectively use interpreters to ensure that an event is inclusive, it is important to understand some basics about American Sign Language (ASL) and interpreting. ASL is a complete, complex language that employs visual signs made by moving the hands combined with facial expressions and postures of the body. ASL is the primary sign language used by Deaf people in the United States.

ASL has its own grammatical structure and rules that dictate the way signs combine to form phrases and sentences. It is important to note that not all Deaf and hard of hearing people use ASL. Some communicate using a combination of ASL signs and English signs; others communicate using home signs, which are unique to a particular family; others use a foreign sign language; and others may not use sign language at all.

## **Federal legal requirements: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

The ADA requires that state and local governments and businesses and nonprofit organizations that serve the public offer Deaf and hard of hearing people an equal opportunity to benefit from and participate in the services they offer. These entities are required to provide auxiliary aids and services, including qualified interpreters, to ensure effective communication with Deaf and hard of hearing people.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act prohibits organizations that receive federal funding from excluding people on the basis of disability or denying them an equal opportunity to receive program benefits and services. Programs receiving any federal funding, therefore, must afford Deaf and hard of hearing people the same opportunities to engage in their services as those who are not Deaf or hard of hearing.

ASL interpreters are highly skilled professionals who are able to facilitate cross-cultural communication between Deaf and hearing people. Interpreters must be able to understand a person's spoken English as well as their intent and be able to accurately, quickly, and comfortably communicate them via ASL to a Deaf person. They must also be able to understand a person's signs and intent and be able to accurately and quickly communicate them via spoken English.

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), a national professional association, certifies interpreters. To receive certification, interpreters undergo tests on their expressive and receptive signing,

sign-to-voice, and voice-to-sign skills. RID maintains a list of interpreters who have the necessary certifications. It supports its members and encourages the growth of the interpreting profession through the establishment of a national standard for qualified sign language interpreters, ongoing professional development, and adherence to a code of professional conduct.

### **Types of sign language interpreters**

The most common types of interpreters are:

- > **American Sign Language interpreter:**  
An ASL interpreter translates from spoken English to American Sign

Language (ASL). When a Deaf participant responds in ASL, the interpreter then voices for that person.

There are two common sub-types of ASL interpreting:

- a. **Tactile interpreting:** Tactile interpreting is sign language received by sense of touch with one or both hands, commonly used by deaf-blind individuals. A tactile interpreter signs or fingerspells to a person by placing a hand under the hand of that person to convey the information being shared by feel.
- b. **Low-vision interpreting:** Low-vision interpreting is sign language at a close visual range and/or within a limited space, commonly used by people with vision loss who can only read signs at close range. Steps may also be taken to ensure a Deaf person can see the interpreter as clearly as possible, such as setting up a black drape behind the interpreter.
- > **Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI):** A CDI is a person who is Deaf or hard of hearing and has been certified as an interpreter by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. A CDI is fluent in both English and ASL and can provide cultural and linguistic expertise.

As a native signer, a CDI can identify subtleties and nuances in a Deaf person's communication, particularly for those who didn't grow up learning ASL. Most often, a CDI and hearing ASL interpreter will work together.

## **Interpreter standards and finding qualified interpreters**

According to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, basic standards that interpreters should meet include:

- > accuracy and fidelity to the original message and intent;
- > confidentiality;
- > impartiality;
- > respect for persons;
- > maintaining role boundaries;
- > accountability;
- > professionalism; and
- > continued competence.

The ADA requires public entities to provide Deaf and hard of hearing people with qualified interpreters. In the domestic and sexual violence fields, at a minimum, this means finding an interpreter who is familiar with key terms and concepts, or even better, an interpreter who has

received in-depth training on understanding domestic and sexual violence and the impact of trauma.

Because of the additional skill set needed to interpret in a domestic and sexual violence setting, it can take two-to-three months to find and secure interpreters with the expertise to meet your needs.

## Providing effective interpreting for your events

As soon as you determine the location, format, and size of your event (<https://perma.cc/5QVM-JUXQ>), start identifying potential interpreters. Ask your Deaf faculty or Deaf colleagues if they have recommendations for qualified interpreters in the geographic area where you will be hosting the event. Once your participants register, reach out to Deaf participants and ask them for their preferred interpreters. Additionally, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf has a searchable database of interpreters and interpreter referral services (<https://perma.cc/J3G4-GHR7>).

There are a number of considerations you should keep in mind in order to provide effective interpreting for Deaf and hard of hearing participants. These considerations—including asking participants

about their interpreting needs when they register, figuring out the appropriate number of interpreters to hire, and preparing interpreters for your event—are discussed in the following sections.

## Registration for your event

When designing registration materials, make sure to include questions about what accommodations your participants will need. Getting this information at the preliminary stage will allow you to prepare for this essential area of accommodation. Here is sample language you can use to learn about your attendees' interpreting needs:

Please indicate your interpreting needs from the list below:

- > American Sign Language
- > certified/Deaf Interpreter
- > close/low vision interpreting
- > tactile interpreting
- > other (Please specify.)

Deaf people are experts in their individual communication needs. Once you receive an interpreting request, reach out to the Deaf participant to make sure you identify an interpreter with the matching skill set.

## How many interpreters should you hire?

A variety of factors determine the number of interpreters you need to hire for your event. The first consideration is that interpreters work in two-person teams. Sign language interpreting can be physically, emotionally, and mentally demanding for interpreters. The industry standard is to have two interpreters work as a team, allowing one to take a break while the other is interpreting, thereby increasing the accuracy and quality of interpreting.

There are two general approaches to determining how many interpreters you need:

- > Have one team of interpreters for each Deaf participant. This allows Deaf

participants to sit anywhere in the room and increases opportunities for them to network with colleagues.

- > Have one team of interpreters per session if all of your Deaf participants require the same type of interpreting. This requires Deaf participants to sit in a specific area of the room to ensure a clear line of sight to the interpreters and may limit networking opportunities.

Other factors, such as the size of your event, the number of co-occurring sessions, and types of interactive activities also affect how many interpreters you need. Below are several scenarios to give you a sense of how the above factors determine the number of interpreters needed at an event.

### Example A: A specialized training

An organization is hosting a one-day training on technology and safety. The training will take place from 9:00 a.m.–4:30 p.m. The curriculum uses a mix of lecture, small group discussion, and interactive exercises. One Deaf person registered for the training and requested American Sign Language interpreters.

#### **Number of interpreters needed:**

Two ASL interpreters

The two interpreters will work together as a team to interpret for the Deaf participant. Since there will only be two interpreters on site, the host organization will need to coordinate with the interpreters to ensure they are able to take breaks during the training and that the Deaf participant will receive interpretation during networking breaks.

### **Example B: A curriculum development meeting**

An organization is hosting a two-day meeting to develop a curriculum for a national law enforcement training. Three experts who are Deaf will be invited to participate. Two Deaf participants requested ASL interpreting and another Deaf participant required low-vision interpreting. The meeting will take place from 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. on both days. During the meeting, the organizers will facilitate large group discussions to generate training goals, topics, and a draft agenda. They will also divide the group into small workgroups to identify learning objectives and activities for each session.

#### **Number of interpreters needed:**

Four ASL interpreters; two ASL interpreters with expertise in low-vision interpreting

In this case, two of the Deaf experts require ASL interpreting while another Deaf expert requires low-vision interpreting. Because the meeting will break into small workgroups, best practice would be to hire two interpreters per Deaf person to allow each Deaf person to attend the desired small workgroup session.

### **Example C: A conference**

An organization is hosting a two-day national conference on ending sexual violence. The conference will take place from 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m. on both days with a film showing occurring from 6:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m. on the first day. On both days, the conference agenda comprises a morning and afternoon plenary session and six morning and afternoon workshops. Three Deaf people

registered for the event and requested American Sign Language interpreters.

#### **Number of interpreters needed:**

Six ASL interpreters at peak times for the conference agenda; two ASL interpreters for after-hours activities

In this complex scenario, the organization has several options in terms of the number of interpreters needed. As

## Example C: A conference (continued)

a general principle, it's best to break down the conference into its distinct components and identify the number of interpreters for each. In this example, there are three components: plenary sessions, workshop sessions, and after-hours activities.

### > **plenary sessions**

(two-to-six interpreters):

If the event will provide reserved seating for Deaf people at the front of the room, two interpreters will be needed for on-stage interpreting. On the other hand, if event hosts want to offer seating choice to the Deaf participants so that they can easily network with their colleagues, six interpreters would be needed for interpreting conversations around tables.

### > **workshop sessions**

(six interpreters):

If all participants are asked to register for workshop sessions in advance of the conference, the event organizer can use that information to determine which workshop sessions will need interpretation based on which sessions the Deaf participants plan to attend.

This type of polling is not a common practice. Moreover, using this information to secure interpreters may create a differential experience between Deaf attendees and their hearing counterparts, as Deaf attendees would not be able to change their mind onsite. A better option is to assume the highest number of interpreters. In this example, six interpreters would allow for each of the three Deaf participants to attend their own workshop session.

### > **after-hours activity**

(two interpreters):

If the event hosts are organizing after-hours activities, they are responsible for ensuring those events are accessible to people with disabilities and Deaf people. For film screenings, if the films are not captioned or if there will be any discussion accompanying the films, two interpreters are needed. In this case, it's probably best to contract with two additional interpreters (not those who interpreted throughout the day).



## Should you hire an interpreter coordinator?

When hosting larger events, or events at which you anticipate a large number of Deaf faculty and/or Deaf presenters, you may want to consider hiring an interpreter coordinator, who can help you:

- > identify and recruit qualified interpreters for your event;
- > figure out how many interpreters you need and your interpreting schedule for the event;
- > ensure that you are matching your Deaf attendees' needs with interpreters who have those skills;
- > set up your space to optimize the interpreting experience; and
- > problem-solve during the event as interpreting needs or issues arise.

## Contracting with interpreters

When contracting with interpreters, be as explicit and detailed about your event as you can be. Address the following when contracting with an interpreter:

- > Clarify interpreters' rates and terms. In advance of your event, ask the interpreter for rates and terms. According

to the Center on Victimization and Safety at the Vera Institute of Justice, many interpreters work on an average hourly rate ranging from \$55–\$85. For conferences, interpreters may charge a day rate. Ask about terms (such as cancellation policy, assignment minimum of hours, etc.) and once agreed upon, clearly state these terms in your contract.

- > Spell out event details. In addition to providing the address for the event in the contract, include details such as parking location, floor and room number(s)/name(s), and dress code.
- > Detail the interpreting schedule. Provide a detailed schedule of your event in the contract. Be sure to schedule interpreters not only for the training sessions, but also for registration, after-hours events, and networking periods. Be sure to allow time for meals for your interpreters.
- > Include travel time compensation rates. Should interpreters be traveling to your event, compensation for travel time is an industry standard. Clearly lay out the travel compensation in the contract.



- > Remember to have a cancellation clause. Pay particular attention to the cancellation clause so that you know how far in advance you need to cancel interpreters without incurring any fees.

## Preparing interpreters in advance

To improve the quality of the interpretation process, ensure that your interpreters are prepared. There are several ways you can do this:

- > **Send materials in advance.** E-mail copies of PowerPoint presentations, handouts, and the event agenda in advance of the event to allow the interpreters to familiarize themselves with the material and terminology that they will be using.
- > **Conduct an interpreter orientation.** Before the event, review your approach to communication access, expectations and schedule, common terminology and signs used in the domestic and sexual violence field, and any other relevant information. This could take the form of a one-hour meeting on the first morning of or the evening before the event.
- > **Host a meet-and-greet event for interpreters and Deaf participants.** A meet-and-greet gives interpreters an

opportunity to learn about the communication needs of the Deaf participants and for Deaf participants to share sign choices and establish a shared vocabulary with the interpreters. It also gives interpreters an opportunity to communicate to the Deaf participants the host organization's approach to and philosophy of interpreting, including such details as whether there will be interpretation during scheduled breaks.

## On-site considerations

As part of the planning process, there are several important on-site considerations for creating an optimal interpreting environment.

- > **audio-visual aids** – Microphones ensure that everyone, especially those who are hard of hearing and may be using assistive listening devices, can hear the information presented at your event. In addition, microphones ensure that interpreters can dedicate their full attention to interpretation without straining to hear. Tripod screens are also often used at events for PowerPoint presentations, videos, or broadcasts of the event. Multiple screens may be needed to ensure all attendees, including Deaf and hard of

hearing attendees who rely heavily on visual information, have a clear line of sight to the screens.

- > **adjustments to the backdrop** – Many event spaces have intricate wallpaper and other decorations, such as mirrors, that can be distracting to and cause eyestrain for Deaf participants. Consider bringing in a solid-colored backdrop if a significant portion of your event is occurring in an area with extremely busy walls.
- > **lighting** – Florescent bulbs can cause a great deal of eyestrain for Deaf people. If you're using a small meeting space with florescent lighting, you may want to bring in other types of lighting to reduce eyestrain. Additionally, if you dim the lights during a presentation, for example to show a video, make sure attendees can still see the interpreters.
- > **placement and line of sight** – Deaf participants need a clear line of sight to interpreters and speakers. Before the event, discuss these placement issues with interpreters and Deaf people to ensure there are no obstructions, such as pillars.

- > **frequent communication and check-ins** – The best way to know if you're meeting the communication needs of Deaf participants is to ask them directly. Check in with Deaf participants throughout the event to see if there's anything you can do to improve their language access.

## Evaluating interpreters

One vital aspect of ensuring effective interpreters for events is routine post-event evaluation. Ask Deaf participants for their impression of their interpreters and review all valuable feedback.

Include a question on your evaluation form about the quality of interpreters and how you might improve language access in the future. Also consider directly following up with Deaf participants about their experience after the event. This information can help you determine whether to contract with a particular interpreter in the future. Interpreters should also receive Deaf participants' constructive feedback after each event.

## Additional Resources

### **Designing accessible events for people with disabilities and Deaf people, Center on Victimization and Safety, Vera Institute of Justice**

<https://perma.cc/5QVM-JUXQ>

### **End Abuse of People with Disabilities**

<https://perma.cc/Z8AR-ZS2Y>

This resource, created by the Vera Institute of Justice, addresses domestic and sexual violence among people with disabilities.

### **Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)**

<https://perma.cc/J3G4-GHR7>

Interpreters' national professional organization that maintains an interpreter referral service and provides information on standards of practice.

### **National Association of the Deaf (NAD)**

<https://perma.cc/P59K-HDEB>

NAD is a national civil rights organization for Deaf and hard of hearing people.

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### **For more information**

The Center on Victimization and Safety (CVS) at the Vera Institute of Justice works with communities around the country to fashion services that reach, appeal to, and benefit all victims. Our work focuses on communities of people who are at elevated risk of harm but often marginalized from victim services and the criminal justice system. We combine research, technical assistance, and training to equip policymakers and practitioners with the information, skills, and resources needed

to effectively serve all victims. To learn more about CVS, contact [cvs@vera.org](mailto:cvs@vera.org).

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