



Best Practices in Access: Hiring Qualified Interpreters

Interpreters play an important role in facilitating effective communication for deaf and hearing people. Interpreters are frequently used in education, from kindergarten through college, graduate or trade school, and the workplace. A qualified interpreter with the right combination of qualifications and professional experience is better able to provide effective communication.

Federal Definition

The U.S. Department of Justice defines a qualified interpreter as “someone who is able to interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially, both receptively (i.e., understanding what the person with the disability is saying) and expressively (i.e., having the skill needed to convey information back to that person) using any necessary specialized vocabulary.”¹

When hiring an interpreter, institutions must consider many different factors, starting with the deaf person’s needs and preferences. NDC’s interactive process tools (nationaldeafcenter.org/iptools) provide sample questions and an interview checklist to ensure that the deaf person’s preferences are considered and understood. The deaf person should lead the discussion regarding interpreting accommodations, and their preferences should be honored wherever possible.

Considerations for Hiring Interpreters

- Interpreters can be hired as independent contractors, through an agency, or in staff positions (part time, full time, or on a contract basis).² Be aware that agencies that do not specialize in sign language interpretation may not be able to meet the needs of deaf people or specific interpreting situations.
- Interpreters can be scheduled in advance or for short-notice requests. To secure the most qualified interpreters and ensure consistency over the course of an assignment, it is best to book interpreters in advance.³

- Remote interpreting options are useful when seeking an interpreter with specific skill sets or when an onsite interpreter is unavailable. Remote interpreting can also be a good fit for online courses or meetings.⁴
- Remember that the process does not end once an interpreter is hired. Follow up with the deaf person throughout the assignment to ensure that the interpreter is providing consistent and effective services.

When deciding whether to hire an interpreter as an employee or to contract with a provider, look at the institution's and the deaf person's needs. Be sure to include all expenses for the budget, not just salary. Additional expenses may include travel, overtime, work outside of normal business hours, remote services, and fringe benefits like parking. Hourly estimates should include travel and prep time in addition to the time interpreting.²

Interpreter Search Tools

- Search the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf's (RID) registry for individual interpreters^{5a} and interpreting agencies.^{5b} Also check with RID affiliate chapters for local referrals.^{5c}
- Contact your state agency⁶ or local community organization supporting deaf people for information and referrals to interpreters.
- If your state requires interpreters to be licensed, the licensing entity may have a public search option to find licensed interpreters.
- Reach out to colleagues in your area, through professional listservs, and with disability advocacy agencies to request local contacts for interpreters.

Interpreter Qualifications and Credentials

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not mandate any specific credentials for working interpreters. However, some states and territories have minimum requirements for interpreters to work in specific settings (e.g., legal, medical, K–12 settings). To find out whether your state has specific regulations for interpreters check with the following:

- The state office or agency that oversees professional licensing or registries
- The state office or agency that provides support services to deaf people⁶
- RID's state-by-state regulations for interpreters⁷

For states without minimum requirements, the following types of interpreter credentials can be used.

Education programs that prepare individuals to perform interpreting services are often called interpreter training programs. Effective interpreting requires more than just fluency in a language. Interpreters may choose from many different types of training programs, including programs that result in academic degrees and professional training programs. Continuing education and training may be required to obtain and maintain certification and/or licensure.

Certification programs often have prerequisites that include training, education, knowledge, and an interpretation skill exam. Interpreters holding certification are accountable to a Code of Professional Conduct⁸ and must complete ongoing continuing education to maintain their knowledge and skills. There are two commonly recognized certification bodies for sign language interpreters: RID⁹ and the Board for Evaluation of Interpreters.¹⁰ Each certification body has different prerequisites and levels of certification.

Evaluating Qualifications

The ADA mandates the use of qualified interpreters. A qualified interpreter could be certified and/or have the right education, experience, and content knowledge for a particular job. Not all certified interpreters are qualified for every job, and there are substantial barriers to obtaining certification for historically marginalized groups. Hiring entities should use a variety of measures and factors when determining whether they are meeting the ADA's definition of qualified. Measures may include education, experience, certification, assessments, licensure, and other regulatory mandates on a state-by-state basis.¹¹

Licensure is a legal requirement that outlines minimum competencies to perform interpreting services in a state. Licensure may require proof of education, certification, and/or an assessment. Many states offer a temporary or provisional license with restrictions on where an interpreter can work, based on their skill level. While licensing standards vary by state, hiring entities may go beyond licensure and employ interpreters who are licensed, certified, and have worked professionally for a number of years.

Assessments are screening tools used to evaluate interpreting skills. Unlike certification or licensure, assessments do not require additional layers of accountability, such as training requirements. Some states may use interpreting assessments to minimally qualify a person to interpret. For example, many states require a minimum score on the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment¹² to interpret in K–12 settings for deaf children.

In sum, a variety of measures are used to determine qualifications. When evaluating or hiring interpreters, look at all of these elements with the deaf person to find the best fit for the situation. Interpreters who can adapt their language use and maintain sensitivity to changing situations, consumers, and content are often the most effective, regardless of other qualifications.

Scheduling Interpreters

Consider the deaf person, content, and setting for each assignment to help determine whether an interpreter has the experience, knowledge, and training to effectively interpret for the assignment. The following can guide your scheduling.

Deaf person's language and communication style preferences. **Who is the deaf consumer, and what kind of interpreting services did they request?** Consult with the deaf person making the request and identify the type of communication access they need. Learn more about interpreters' experience working with diverse deaf people and their ability to work with different cultural backgrounds and the range of communication access needs. Consider using a deaf interpreter¹¹ when possible to improve access.

Nature and context of the assignment. **Can the interpreter expressively and receptively interpret the content?** Interpreters must be able to match the differing language registers used across settings—for example, ranging from professional interviews to medical appointments or from high-level faculty meetings to one-on-one tutoring sessions. In some situations, an interpreter who is familiar with the specific content (e.g., engineering, linguistics) may be the most appropriate choice for providing effective communication.³

Interpreter availability. **Is the interpreter available during the scheduled days and times for the assignment to provide consistent interpreting services?** Interpreting assignments' start and end times vary and may include evenings and weekends. Assignments may be one time (e.g., appointment, meeting) or ongoing (e.g., semester-long class, recurring faculty meetings). Some assignments require travel or are conducted remotely. Discuss the possibility of working outside of scheduled times for requests like meetings or study groups related to the assignment.

BEST PRACTICES IN ACCESS: HIRING QUALIFIED INTERPRETERS

Unique interpreting assignments such as theatrical performances require hours of preparation and interpreting for rehearsals and performances on various dates and times. To ensure consistent interpreting services, inquire about the interpreter's availability and willingness to work during the specific timeframe, which may be outside of normal business hours.

Planning ahead and understanding how to measure the best fit for qualified interpreters will save time and resources and will ensure effective communication!

For more resources and information on hiring, using, and understanding interpreters, visit NDC's interpreting topic page: nationaldeafcenter.org/interpreting

Additional Resources

1. U.S. Department of Justice: ADA Requirements: Effective Communication
ada.gov/effective-comm.htm
2. Developing Contracts and Requesting Bids: Interpreters and Speech-to-Text Providers
nationaldeafcenter.org/contracts
3. Best Practices in Access: Interpreter Consistency
nationaldeafcenter.org/interpreter-consistency
4. Best Practices in Access: Video Remote Interpreting
nationaldeafcenter.org/vri
5. Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID):
 - a. Individual Member Registry: myaccount.rid.org/Public/Search/Member.aspx
 - b. Interpreting Agencies Registry: myaccount.rid.org/Public/Search/Interpreter.aspx
 - c. Affiliate Chapters: rid.org/membership/affiliate-chapters/affiliate-chapter-map
6. National Association of State Agencies of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing: USA Roster
nasadhh.org/usa-roster
7. RID: State-by-State Regulations for Interpreters and Transliterators
rid.org/advocacy-overview/state-information-and-advocacy
8. RID: NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct
rid.org/ethics/code-of-professional-conduct
9. RID: Certification Overview
rid.org/rid-certification-overview
10. Board for Evaluation of Interpreters: Certification Program
hhs.texas.gov/doing-business-hhs/provider-portals/assistive-services-providers/board-evaluation-interpreters-certification-program
11. Best Practices in Access: Deaf Interpreters
nationaldeafcenter.org/deafinterpreters
12. Boys Town National Research Hospital: Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment
boystownhospital.org/professional-education/eipa



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