How to find and work with interpreters

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires state and local governments, businesses and nonprofit organizations to provide communication access to people who are deaf and hard of hearing. For many deaf people, this means providing an American Sign Language/English interpreter.

Step 1: Find an interpreter

Collect the details

- Name, address and telephone number of a contact person for confirmation and billing.
- Date and time interpreter is needed. Events longer than two hours may require two interpreters.
- Event location and address.
- Number of participants who are Deaf and hard of hearing and their names.
- Type of event. Events with many speakers or technical content may require two interpreters.
- Type of interpreter needed. See our Types of interpreters fact sheet for more information.

Contact an interpreter referral agency

- Select an agency.
  - Find a current list of interpreter referral agencies serving your area on our website.
  - Consider contacting more than one agency. This is especially helpful in Greater Minnesota where there are fewer interpreters.
  - Ask for the agency’s cancellation policy and payment procedures.
    - Cancellations after the cancellation deadline often require full payment.
    - If you need to cancel, contact the agency as soon as possible to avoid being billed.
  - Contact an agency at least two weeks prior to the event date for best results.

Watch for confirmation

- Watch for a confirmation from the agency with the name of the interpreter(s).
- When you receive confirmation from one agency, cancel your request to other agencies to avoid double booking (and double billing).
- Follow up with the agency if you do not receive a confirmation.
Step 2: Work with the interpreter

Meet with the interpreter beforehand
■ Discuss unique vocabulary, technical terms, acronyms, jargon, seating arrangements, lighting and other needs.
■ Provide the interpreter with any written materials ahead of time.

Reserve seats for the deaf or hard of hearing participants
■ Provide a clear view of the speaker and interpreter.
■ Deaf or hard of hearing participants may still choose to sit elsewhere.

Offer the interpreter space near the speaker or action
■ This allows deaf or hard of hearing participants to pick up visual cues and expressions of the speaker and see any presentation materials.
■ In small group discussions, consider using a circle or semi-circle seating arrangement instead of a theater-style arrangement.

Provide good lighting
■ Good lighting helps the participants see the interpreter clearly.
■ Do not place the interpreter in front of a window if blinds cannot be adjusted.
■ If lights will be turned off or dimmed, make sure the interpreter can still be seen clearly. If necessary, use a spotlight or small lamp to direct light toward the interpreter.

Speak naturally
■ Speak at your normal pace. Interpreters will ask you to slow down or repeat if necessary.
■ Interpreters listen for concepts and ideas, not just words, to render an accurate interpretation.

Know that everything the interpreter hears will be interpreted
■ Do not ask the interpreter to censor any portion of the conversation.
■ Ask the deaf or hard of hearing person directly if they are following the conversation.

Ask participants to speak one at a time
■ An interpreter can only interpret for one speaker at a time. Remind the group to take turns speaking.
■ If you are facilitating a group discussion, be aware that the interpreter will be several seconds behind. Pause before recognizing the next speaker to allow the interpreter to finish with the current speaker.
■ Ask participants to identify themselves by name before speaking.

Talk directly to the deaf or hard of hearing person
■ Maintain eye contact with the deaf or hard of hearing person.
■ Speak directly to the deaf or hard of hearing person.
■ Avoid directing comments to the interpreter. Do not say “Tell him...” or “Ask her...”

Do not ask the interpreter to comment on the content of the meeting
■ Interpreters follow a code of ethics that requires impartiality and confidentiality with all assignment-related information.
■ Do not assume the interpreter knows the Deaf person or will be interpreting future appointments.

Provide a short break every hour
■ Interpreting is mentally and physically taxing.
■ Do not expect the interpreter to interpret during these breaks.
Attention. If you need free help interpreting this document, call the above number.

800-657-3663