Types of sign language interpreters

The type of interpreter needed for an assignment will depend on the consumer and the contents of the interaction. Unlike spoken language interpreters, sign language interpreters are an accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Interpreters who work in community settings are called freelance interpreters. They may be contracted directly by hiring entities or through referral agencies. Most interpreting requests are filled by freelance interpreters.

Places with a high demand for interpreters may have staff interpreters. Staff interpreters are common in hospitals, educational institutions or businesses with many deaf and hearing people working together.

American Sign Language interpreters

American Sign Language-English interpreters facilitate communication between parties using American Sign Language and spoken English. Certified American Sign Language interpreters have passed a minimum standard skills test. They are required to follow a code of professional conduct that demands ethical behavior, accuracy of the message and confidentiality of assignments. They are also required to take ongoing workshops and training to maintain their certification. Certifying agencies provide a complaint process to address concerns about interpreter behavior or quality.

Note that American Sign Language is not a universal language. Deaf people from other countries have their own signed languages.

Interpreter specialization

Interpreters are certified as generalist practitioners, meaning they are able to interpret in most general settings. Interpreters may develop various areas of specialization with additional skills and training.

- Interpreters for people who are deafblind interpret through touch (known as tactile interpreting) or at close visual range. They also interpret additional visual and acoustic environmental information. They may use ProTactile ASL to provide greater access to information that supports understanding and engagement. Since dual sensory loss is unique to each individual, interpreters who work with people who are deafblind must understand and be able to use a wide range of effective communication strategies.
- Educational interpreters have experience interpreting in K-12 education settings.
- Legal interpreters have completed advanced training in legal interpreting. They understand and accurately interpret in all legal settings.

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from suspect interviews, to attorney-client meetings to trials.

Medical and/or mental health interpreters have completed advanced training in interpreting within the medical field. They understand and accurately interpret in medical and mental health settings for which they are qualified.

Performing arts interpreters have experience interpreting for the performing arts. They have specialized skills interpreting music, conveying a wide range of drama and emotion and managing multiple character shifts.

Trilingual interpreters are fluent in a third signed or spoken language.

Deaf interpreters are interpreters who are deaf themselves. They are uniquely skilled at adapting interpretations for individuals who use foreign sign language or require highly visual-gestural communication. They also provide translation of written documents into American Sign Language. Deaf interpreters often work in teams with other American Sign Language interpreters.

Cued speech transliterator

Cued American English is a communication system for people with hearing loss that shows vowels and consonants through handshapes. Cued speech transliterators follow a code of conduct and are certified by the Testing, Evaluation and Certification (TEC) Unit.

Cued speech transliterators:

- Translitrate the spoken message into Cued American English (CAE) using the system of cued speech for people with hearing loss.
- Translitrate the cued message into spoken English for hearing persons.

Oral interpreters

Oral interpreters facilitate communication between hearing people and people with a hearing loss who rely heavily on speechreading (or lip reading) for communication. An oral interpreter is trained to enunciate, repeat or rephrase a speaker’s remarks using natural lip movements and gestures. Certified oral interpreters follow a code of professional conduct established by the National Association of the Deaf–Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf National Council on Interpreting.

Learn more

For more information about laws covering sign language interpreters, please see our fact sheet Legal obligation to provide communication access.

For more information about hiring and working with an interpreter, please see our fact sheet How to find and work with an interpreter.
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