



American Sign Language Interpreter Teams

FACT SHEET

While all language interpreting is mentally taxing, sign language interpreting adds a physical dimension due to its nature as a visual language. As a result, for many legal interpreting assignments, sign language interpreters work in pairs. The professional association for language interpreters, the National Association for Judiciary Interpreters and Translators defines team interpreting as “the practice of using two interpreters who rotate to provide simultaneous or consecutive interpretation for one or more [non-English speaking] individuals.” Team interpreters alternate interpreting duties to reduce mental and physical fatigue, reduce the potential for errors in the interpretation by monitoring and making adjustments as necessary to ensure accuracy, assist with note-taking and with monitoring the environmental logistics of the interpreted setting.

Research has confirmed the physical challenges that sign language interpreters face when they work alone for long periods of time. The professional association has long been concerned that the proper ergonomic conditions, including the use of two interpreters who alternate interpreting, be implemented for the physical health of sign language interpreters. According to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), all sign language interpreters are at risk of developing some kind of Repetitive Stress Injury (RSI) during their careers, and if ignored, RSI can develop into a permanent disability. RSI is defined as “a stress-related, cumulative type of injury resulting from constant repetitive movements. Tendons, ligaments and muscles are worn down over time doing repetitive tasks with insufficient rest periods. Awkward angles during movement, constant and continual vibrations, temperature extremes and dehydration are some of the other culprits that can contribute to the development of RISs. This soft tissue injury includes more than twenty different kinds of injuries including carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, thoracic outlet syndrome, among others. RSI is also known as cumulative trauma disorder, muscle-skeletal disorder, repetitive motion injuries, tennis elbow and mouse thumb.” www.rid.org. There are many things interpreters can do to prevent RSI and key among those is to work in teams.

In addition to the physical aspects, interpreting is mentally taxing. Research has shown that there are 22 discrete cognitive activities taking place simultaneously when a spoken language interpreter is working (Vidal, 1997). It is likely that this number is greater for sign language interpreters who are working in an

additional visual dimension while interpreting. Scholarship from the field of interpreting suggests that mental fatigue sets in after approximately 30 minutes of sustained simultaneous interpretation, resulting in the marked loss of accuracy in the interpretation (Cokely, 1992; Moser-Mercer, et. al, 1998). When an interpreter is not actually interpreting but in the 'off' position, the interpreter is not actually off duty. Rather, the interpreter is actively monitoring the working interpreter's accuracy and making adjustments as indicated. At times, these adjustments need to be made immediately and you might see the team interpreter surreptitiously sign or speak to the working interpreter to adjust the interpretation. At other times, the team interpreter might make a written note and discuss the point with the interpreter at a break. Rarely, and typically during witness testimony by an individual who is deaf, the interpreters might seek permission to confer with each other to adjust the interpretation for accuracy. Since the interpreters are ethically obligated and sworn to interpret accurately, these communications should be welcomed. These modifications are not viewed as a sign of substandard interpreting skill; rather, they are properly viewed as a commitment to the fidelity of the interpretation.

Hence, team interpreting provides the court with an additional measure of security to ensure that the record is accurate and the non-English speaking parties are fully present and able to participate in the proceedings. Spoken language interpreter associations are in accord. According to the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, "[t]eam interpreting is the quality control mechanism implemented to preserve the accuracy of the interpretation process in any circumstance." (www.najit.org). Should you have more questions regarding team interpreting, further information is available from the NCIEC at www.nciec.org, under the Projects tab at the Legal Interpreting Work Group link.

References

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