



National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers

FACT SHEET

The Use of Interpreting Teams in the Courtroom

While all language interpreting is mentally taxing, sign language interpreting adds a physical dimension. For this reason, sign language interpreters often work in pairs on legal interpreting assignments. 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. In addition, the non-working interpreter will monitor the working interpreter and suggest adjustments be made when necessary. In this way, the use of team interpreters reduces the potential for errors and ensures accuracy. This document will briefly describe the benefits of team interpreting.

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), the professional association for sign language interpreters, has long been concerned that the proper ergonomic conditions be implemented for the physical health of sign language interpreters. Research confirms the physical challenges sign language interpreters face when they work alone for long periods of time. According to the RID, all sign language interpreters are at risk of developing a Repetitive Stress Injury (RSI), “a stress-related, cumulative type of injury resulting from constant repetitive movements,” during their careers. If ignored, RSI injuries can lead to a permanent disability. One of the ways that interpreters can prevent RSI is to work in teams.

Interpreting is also mentally taxing. Research shows that there are 22 discrete cognitive activities taking place simultaneously when a spoken language interpreter is working.¹ It is likely that this number is greater for sign language interpreters who also work in an additional visual dimension. Scholarship from the field of interpreting suggests that mental fatigue sets in after approximately 30 minutes of sustained simultaneous interpretation, resulting in the

¹ Vidal, M. (1997, Winter). New study on fatigue confirms need for working in teams. *Proteus*, (6)1. Washington, DC: National Association of Judicial Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT).

marked loss of accuracy.² The use of interpreting teams also prevents against this mental fatigue.

In team interpreting, the non-working interpreter in the “off” position is not actually off duty. Rather, the interpreter is actively monitoring the working interpreter’s accuracy and making necessary adjustments. At times, these adjustments need to be made immediately and the non-working team interpreter may 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 her team interpreter at a break. Rarely, the interpreters might seek permission to confer with each other to adjust the interpretation for accuracy. This is most likely to happen during witness testimony by a deaf individual. 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, on the Consortium’s Work on Legal Interpreting subpage under the Legal Specialization link.

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² Cokely, D. (1992). Interpretation: A sociolinguistic model. Burtonsville, MD: Linstok Press; Moser-Mercer, B., Kunzli, B., & Korac, M. (1998). Prolonged turns in interpreting: Effects on quality, physiological and psychological stress. University of Geneva, École de Traduction et d’Interprétation. *Interpreting*, 3(1), p. 47-64. John Benjamins Publishing Co.