NIEC

NATIONAL INTERPRETER EDUCATION CENTER

**UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES OF
DEAF INTERPRETERS**

Needs Assessment Report

Prepared for the Rehabilitation Services Administration by:

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Foreword

Through grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), the National Interpreter Education Center (NIEC) and five Regional Interpreter Education Centers (RIEC) work collaboratively to increase the number and availability of qualified interpreters nationwide. The collaborative is widely known in the field as the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC).

A funded requirement of the federal grant program is to conduct ongoing activities to assess the communication needs of d/Deaf individuals, and then use that information as the basis for developing interpreter education priorities and strategies. This report is based on the findings of a structured needs assessment activity designed to capture information related to the experiences of Deaf interpreters and their training and educational needs.

Acknowledgments

Understanding the Challenges of
Deaf Interpreters

Introduction

Interpreters are increasingly providing services to d/Deaf individuals with complex communication needs, including d/Deaf individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, individuals who are Deaf Plus, and a growing number of d/Deaf individuals with idiosyncratic sign language. Interpreters who are d/Deaf themselves have proven to be the best solution for interpreting for individuals from these and other at-risk segments of the d/Deaf population. Deaf interpreters bring their own lived experience as d/Deaf people, as well as ASL fluency, gestural communication, and other strategies and interventions to the interpreting assignment (Cogen & Cokely 2015). They are often able to establish a linguistic and cultural bridge that is missing when hearing interpreters work alone, particularly with d/Deaf individuals with complex and unique communication needs. Most Deaf interpreters work in tandem with hearing interpreters. The Deaf/hearing interpreting team ensures that the spoken language message reaches the d/Deaf consumer in a language or communication form they can understand, and that their message is effectively conveyed in spoken language.

Despite their consistent success in both routine and high-risk interpreting situations, Deaf interpreters and Deaf/hearing interpreting teams are often underutilized due to a general lack of awareness of the benefits of the resource. In addition, there is often a perceived higher cost associated with hiring a Deaf/hearing interpreting team versus a single hearing interpreter. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that because of the overall efficacy and efficiency of Deaf/hearing interpreting teams, the costs of hiring a team can in fact be lower in the long run than costs that can incur from repeated miscommunication and critical misunderstandings (Cogen & Cokely, 2015). Although Deaf interpreters and Deaf/hearing interpreting teams have proven to be a highly effective resource, there is currently a national shortage of these professionals. In addition, there are few training and education programs dedicated to Deaf interpreter practice, and limited channels for exposing d/Deaf individuals to a potential career path as a Deaf interpreter.

The purpose of this needs assessment effort was to understand more about the experiences and training needs of Deaf interpreters. In 2016, the National Interpreter Education Center (NIEC) conducted a survey of Deaf interpreters from across the country. Through that survey, 43 Deaf interpreters provided input regarding their background, education, and experience interpreting. Findings of the survey are presented in this needs assessment report. In addition to the survey, five intensive focus group sessions were conducted involving a total of 18 Deaf interpreters. The input gathered in the focus group sessions is also presented in this report, and provides a more qualitative perspective regarding the work experiences and training needs of Deaf interpreters.

Demographics and Background of Respondents

In the survey, 70% of respondents reported they were female, and 30% male. In the focus group sessions, 11 of the participants were female, and 7 were male. In addition, 79% of respondents identified as White/Caucasian, and 3% as African American/Black. Another 18% of respondents did not identify their cultural origin. In the focus group sessions, 15 of the participants identified as White/Caucasian, and three as African American/Black.

The survey also captured information related to the age of respondents. In the survey, 3% of respondents reported they were between the ages of 21 and 30; 24% were between the ages of 31 and 40; 30% between 41 and 50, and 21% were over the age of 50. In the survey, 18% of respondents also reported they were the child of a d/Deaf parent. In the focus group sessions, nearly a third of participants had a d/Deaf parent. Survey respondents were also asked about their language use. With regard to first language use, 65% of respondents reported a mix of ASL and English; 39% said ASL, and 6% said English. When asked to rate their overall language ability in ASL, 94% said they understand and sign comfortably, with little difficulty. With regard to their overall language ability in English, 18% of respondents said they read and write with average skills; 30% with above average skills, and 51% with superior skills.

The survey also collected information regarding the educational background of respondents. With regard to their elementary and secondary education experience, 12% attended a mainstream setting and were the only d/Deaf student; 18% attended a mainstream setting that included other d/Deaf students; 24% attended a d/Deaf residential school, and 24% of respondents attended a mix of mainstream and residential settings. The survey also asked respondents to report on their postsecondary experience: 3% of respondents reported they had completed some college coursework, but did not earn a degree; 12% hold an AA/AS Degree; 27% a BA/BS Degree, and 49% hold an MA/MS degree. The survey further asked respondents to report whether they had attended a formal interpreter education program (IEP). In response, only 39% of respondents reported they had attended an IEP. Respondents were also asked if they had received support from a mentor: 51% reported they had. When asked whether that mentor was d/Deaf or hearing, 41% said their mentor was d/Deaf; 35% said their mentor was hearing, and 23% of respondents reported they had both hearing and d/Deaf mentors.

In the survey, 97% of Deaf interpreter respondents reported they were working as a professional interpreter. When asked if they had intended to become a Deaf interpreter, 70% responded no, that they 'fell into' the profession. At the time of the survey, 21% of the respondents were working full-time as a Deaf interpreter; 70% work part time, and 9% have a flexible work schedule. Respondents were asked to report how many years of experience they had as a professional interpreter. Of the respondents, 30% reported they had 1 to 5 years of experience; 30% of respondents had 6 to 10 years; 9% had 11 to 15 years; 9% had 16 to 20 years, and 21% of respondents had more than 20 years of professional interpreting experience.

Survey respondents also reported on the interpreting credentials they hold: 90% hold CDI certification; 7% hold SC:L credentials, and 7% hold RSC certification. Note some individuals may hold more than one certificate. The survey asked respondents how long they worked as a professional interpreter before receiving their first state or national credential/certification. In response, 9% of respondents reported they hold no credentials; 18% only began interpreting once they held credentials; 36% worked between 1 and 4 years before attaining credentials; 12% between 5 and 9 years; 9% between 10 and 15 years; and 15% for more than 15 years.

The interactive aspect of the focus group sessions provided an opportunity to capture additional, more qualitative, input from Deaf interpreters. That input has been aggregated and summarized in the following section of the report to provide a more in-depth snapshot of the Deaf interpreter's experience.

Interpreter Education Experience

The focus group participants had widely varying experiences with regard to interpreter education. Many participants saw interpreter education as a necessary and important pathway to becoming a professional interpreter. However, only a third of focus group participants attended a formal IEP program. Most of the focus group participants got their interpreter education through a mix of on-line courses, professional development workshops, membership organizations, mentorships, and other avenues of professional development designed specifically for the Deaf interpreter. These experiences were generally described as positive, empowering, and enriching.

Participants that did attend an IEP has less positive experiences. Most described the IEP experience as hearing-centered and focused on the needs of hearing students. Those participants reported they were typically the only d/Deaf student in the program, and that spoken English was the primary language used. A few participants said they did not receive accommodations or classroom support, although they asked for it. These participants said their communication needs were not met by the instructor, and the opportunity for participating in group discussions or interacting with peers was limited or non-existent. However, other participants said their communication needs were met in the IEP setting, and that the instructor was very attuned to their needs, and adapted the stimulus to meet those needs. A number of the focus group participants agreed that the IEP coursework is too basic for those d/Deaf students that have been using sign language their entire life. It is not surprising that most participants reported they formed stronger, longer lasting relationships with d/Deaf student peers than with hearing student peers, although there were some participants that were successful in that regard.

All of the participants identified a need for more practicum and induction experiences focused on Deaf/hearing interpreting teams. Many would also like to see additional mentoring opportunities made available in the field which pair Deaf mentors with Deaf mentees.

Interpreting Experience

All of the focus group participants reported they were working as a professional interpreter. However, many of these participants described encountering a number of barriers with regard to finding full-time employment. Many said they have to promote and advertise their own services, and educate service providers about the value they bring to the table. Most of the participants described an overall lack of awareness in the field regarding Deaf interpreter services, and the value of the resource. Several of the participants cited perceptions in the field that limit their use, including the perceived additional costs of hiring a team of interpreters versus a single hearing interpreter. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that because of the overall efficacy and efficiency of Deaf/hearing interpreting teams, the costs of hiring a team are lower in the long term than the costs that can result from miscommunications and misunderstandings. Several of the participants further reported that many referral agencies are not 'Deaf friendly,' and are unaware of the value Deaf interpreters can bring to the assignment.

A number of participants pointed to members of the Deaf community as barriers to their use. They said d/Deaf individuals often aren't aware of the benefits of using Deaf interpreters, and therefore don't explicitly request their services. For hearing interpreters and interpreting students, insufficient exposure and lack of appreciation of the value of teamwork with Deaf interpreters is another factor that limits the extent to which a hearing interpreter will request support from a Deaf interpreter. Several participants pointed out that the gateway to increasing work for Deaf interpreters is through experienced hearing interpreters who know when they need a team. Novice interpreters are more likely to think they can do the job themselves.

Many of the focus group participants reported they work with d/Deaf individuals with limited language use and other complex communication challenges. This type of work often necessitates teaming with a hearing interpreter, but many of the participants pointed to a dearth of available training focused on preparing Deaf and hearing interpreters for work on interpreting teams. Several of the participants have had experience working on trilingual teams, but describe the process as lengthy, and the qualifications of the hearing interpreter as inconsistent. However, a few pointed out that when both members of the Deaf/hearing interpreting team have the requisite skills and competencies, interpretation is effective and efficient.

Summary

Many of the challenges brought about by current demographic shifts, a growing number of individuals who are Deaf Plus, and increased use of idiosyncratic sign language call for more and better-trained Deaf interpreters and Deaf/hearing interpreting teams. Although these resources have been largely overlooked in the past, today, demand for Deaf interpreter services is on the rise. In a 2016 NIEC Referral Agency Survey, 63% of respondents reported they

needed more Deaf interpreters. In the 2015 Trends Survey, 61% of service provider respondents reported they had experienced increased demand for Deaf interpreter services.

In addition, interpreters are increasingly asking for training for work on Deaf/hearing interpreting teams. In the 2016 Practitioner Survey, 73% of interpreter respondents reported they needed training for working on Deaf/hearing interpreting teams. In an earlier 2014 Practitioner Survey, the highest ranked professional development needs identified by respondents were: working with individuals with dysfluent or idiosyncratic language; working with individuals who are Deaf Plus; working in Deaf/hearing interpreter teams; working with immigrants/refugees, and working with Deaf-Blind individuals. All five areas interrelate to one another and entail services to at-risk d/Deaf individuals who would benefit from Deaf interpreter services.

Despite the growing demand for Deaf interpreters and Deaf/hearing interpreting teams, their services are still undervalued and scarce. In the 2015 Trends Survey, 87% of respondents reported it is difficult to find qualified Deaf interpreters. In the 2013 Report on Referral Agencies Needs Assessment Cogen and Cokey report that 87% of respondents reported they did not employ any full-time Deaf interpreters; the remaining 13% of respondents reported they only employed between 1 and 4 full-time Deaf interpreters. National Practitioner Surveys conducted by NCIEC over the past five years, less than 3% or less of respondents reported they were Deaf. In those same surveys, only a very small percentage of hearing interpreter respondents reported they worked on Deaf/hearing interpreting teams, although working on Deaf/hearing teams was ranked high by respondents as a training priority (Schafer & Cokely, 2016).

Outreach and recruitment are clearly needed to bring more d/Deaf individuals into the interpreting profession, including d/Deaf individuals from diverse communities. Funding for scholarships or stipends to attract and support Deaf interpreter students are also needed. However, widespread recruitment efforts must go hand in hand with increased training and professional development opportunities. Today there is still a dearth of focused, field-based opportunities. In the 2014 Interpreter Education Program Survey, 75% of respondents reported their program does not provide preparation for Deaf interpreters. Those 25% of programs that reported they did offer preparation for Deaf interpreters reported they only have between 1 and 3 d/Deaf students enrolled in those programs. It appears that not only do very few programs offer preparation for Deaf interpreters, those that do have very few d/Deaf students enrolled in the programs. It is also not clear the extent to which Deaf and hearing interpreting students have opportunities to train together for work on Deaf/hearing interpreting teams

More work needs to be done to establish effective practices for use of Deaf/hearing interpreting teams, and to promote and disseminate information to the d/Deaf community, as well as external service providers, regarding the benefits of Deaf interpreters. At the same time, there is a current shortage of these professionals, so a balance must be struck between advocating for their use and ensuring the interpreting workforce is positioned to meet any

additional demands for Deaf interpreter services that may arise from that heightened exposure and awareness.

References:

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