
DHCC Deaf/Hearing Team Rationale

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Introduction

An important approach in the profession of interpreting is the use of a Deaf/Hearing team: one hearing interpreter and one Deaf interpreter. This is the most effective way to ensure accurate communication. Deaf interpreters are members of the Deaf community and share the same culture and language, American Sign Language (ASL), with the Deaf consumer. ASL is not signed English. ASL is not a verbal, word-for-word representation of spoken English. ASL, like any other foreign language, is a separate, distinct language, with its own grammar and syntax. A Deaf consumer whose primary language is ASL often needs the English language “interpreted” into ASL.

The use of a Deaf/Hearing team is especially important in life altering situations, such as legal or mental health settings. Accuracy in communication is essential in these settings. Errors cannot be corrected at a later time or the consequences of errors may have a catastrophic impact on the Deaf consumer’s life. The Deaf/hearing team is the best way to optimize the accuracy of communication for native ASL users.

There are other Deaf people who need the Deaf/hearing team. Deaf consumers who use a foreign sign language or have minimal communication skills or have visual limitations benefit from a Deaf/Hearing team. For example, a Deaf/Hearing team is important for Deaf people who have been isolated and have no formal language system. They may use their own idiosyncratic signing system. A Deaf interpreter is more visually attuned and has more experience using mime, gestures, drawings and other tools to accurately interpret these personalized systems.

The hearing customer needs the Deaf/Hearing team as much as the Deaf consumer. For example, the hearing customer such as judge or physician relies on the Deaf/Hearing team to convey accurate information in order to perform his or her job.

Interpreter Roles in a Deaf/Hearing Team

The hearing interpreter’s primary language, English, is not the primary language of the Deaf consumer. Thus, the hearing interpreter is not as aware of all the linguistic nuances and cultural norms as the Deaf interpreter.

In Deaf/Hearing team situations, the Deaf consumer communicates with the Deaf interpreter who transmits the message in ASL to the hearing interpreter. The hearing interpreter then interprets the ASL into spoken English for the hearing customer. The process then reverses with the hearing customer speaking English and the hearing interpreter interpreting the message to the Deaf interpreter. The Deaf interpreter transmits the message to the Deaf consumer and ensures that the Deaf consumer understands the message by using culturally and linguistically appropriate language.

The Deaf and hearing interpreters work together to understand the Deaf consumer’s message. They may consult with each other to ensure they have the correct meaning. The Deaf/Hearing team functions as a unit, to fully interpret from ASL to English and vice versa.

Benefits of a Deaf/Hearing Team

Teamwork: In life-altering situations such as courts and hospitals, one often sees a “team” of doctors or lawyers working together with one consumer/patient. The team approach allows for different specialists to combine their expertise in the most effective way possible. The same applies for Deaf/Hearing teamwork in interpreting. Both members bring their essential skills and experiences to the situation and ensure that the best communication access is provided.

Reduces Stress: Life-altering situations are very stressful. Under this pressure, any person may have trouble concentrating. Using the most familiar form of communication puts the person at ease and reduces stress. For the Deaf consumer, this means using a Deaf interpreter who shares the same first language, ASL.

Avoids Misunderstandings: Legal and mental health situations have serious consequences. Hearing professionals must make sure there are no misunderstandings or omissions because of poor communication. Any such miscommunication could be the cause of a misdiagnosis or wrong decision, a dangerous outcome for the Deaf consumer.

Consecutive Interpreting: There are two types of signed interpreting. The most common is simultaneous interpreting, when the interpreter is interpreting what he or she hears as soon as he or she has the basic concept. The interpreter is usually keeping up with the hearing speaker or Deaf consumer. The other type is consecutive interpreting, which is usually used by foreign language interpreters. This mode allows the interpreter to determine that he or she has full understanding of what is communicated. The interpreter may ask the speaker/signer for clarification before beginning to interpret. The Deaf/Hearing team functions in a consecutive manner.

Language Matching: When communicating, Deaf consumers will do their best to accommodate hearing people, even hearing interpreters. Therefore, the Deaf consumer may communicate in a “broken” English sign order rather than strictly ASL, his or her first language. This effort increases the Deaf consumer’s anxiety and stress, and results in his/her inability to appropriately convey his/her thoughts or comprehend what is communicated. With a Deaf/Hearing team, there is no need for the Deaf consumer to pretend to understand or change his/her communication.

Cost Efficient: The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) makes it very clear that the service provider is responsible to provide and pay for access. When a Deaf/Hearing team is needed, the service provider may be concerned about the cost. However, getting accurate, clear communication is the best way to quickly assess the situation and develop a plan of action to assist the Deaf consumer in the most cost-efficient way. Misunderstandings can lead to poor treatment, longer hospital stays, wrongful convictions, etc. Legal action by Deaf consumers has resulted in costly settlements.

Conclusion

Using a Deaf/Hearing team ensures quality communication that is cost-effective and beneficial for all those involved.