

# PROFESSIONAL SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING

*The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., (RID) Standard Practice Paper (SPP) provides a framework of basic, respectable standards for RID members' professional work and conduct with consumers. This paper also provides specific information about the practice setting. This document is intended to raise awareness, educate, guide and encourage sound basic methods of professional practice. The SPP should be considered by members in arriving at an appropriate course of action with respect to their practice and professional conduct.*

*It is hoped that the standards will promote commitment to the pursuit of excellence in the practice of interpreting and be used for public distribution and advocacy.*

## About sign language interpreting

Sign language interpreting makes communication possible between people who are deaf or hard of hearing and people who can hear. Interpreting is a complex process that requires a high degree of linguistic, cognitive and technical skills in both English and American Sign Language (ASL). Sign language interpreting, like spoken language interpreting, involves more than simply replacing a word of spoken English with a signed representation of that English word. ASL has its own grammatical rules, sentence structure and cultural nuances. Interpreters must thoroughly understand the subject matter in which they work so that they are able to convert information from one language, known as the source language, into another, known as the target language. In addition, interpretations can incorporate cultural information associated with the languages used.

## What a sign language interpreter does

Most sign language interpreters either interpret, which means working between English and ASL, or they transliterate, which is working between spoken English and a form of a signed language that uses a more English-based word order. Some interpreters specialize in oral interpreting for deaf or hard of hearing persons who lip-read instead of sign. Other specialties include tactile signing, which is interpreting for persons who are blind as well as deaf by conveying signs into a person's hands; cued speech; and signing exact English.

An interpreter's work begins before arriving at the job site. The interpreter must become familiar with the subject matter that the speakers will discuss; a task that may involve research on topic-related words and phrases that may be used from both languages. The interpreter usually travels to the location where his or her services are needed; physical presence is required except for video conferencing or video telephone interpretation. While interpreters may not completely specialize in a particular field or industry, many do focus on one area of expertise such as business, law, medicine or education.

There are two types of interpretation: simultaneous and consecutive. Simultaneous interpretation requires interpreters to listen and sign, or watch and speak, at the same time. The interpreter begins to convey a sentence in the target language while listening or watching the message being delivered in the source language. This type of interpreting happens most commonly in business meetings, college classes or conferences.

In contrast, consecutive interpretation begins only after the speaker has spoken or signed a sentence or paragraph. Interpreters may need to take notes to assist in the process of creating a coherent accurate translation. This form of interpretation is used most often for witness testimony in legal settings or in a one-on-one meeting such as with a doctor, social worker or counsellor. In both simulta-

neous and consecutive interpreting, the interpreter sits in proximity to the English speaker to allow the deaf person to see the interpreter as well as the facial and body expressions of the English speaker.

Because of the need for a high degree of concentration in both types of interpretation and because of the physical demands of the work, interpreters often work in pairs, with each interpreting 20-to 30-minute segments<sup>1</sup>.

### **Where professional interpreters work**

Interpreters work in a variety of settings and situations. Interpreters may work as employees of an interpreting agency or may be self-employed and as such are referred to as free-lance, independent contractors. Independent contractors may schedule their own assignments directly or receive assignments through interpreter service agencies. Some states have laws that specifically govern the relationship between agencies and interpreters.

Interpreters provide services wherever a deaf or hard of hearing person needs to communicate with people who can hear but cannot sign fluently for themselves; such as in educational, medical field, theatre and legal settings; for conferences and conventions; or at corporations and institutions. Interpreters may also work as video relay interpreters, where deaf or hard of hearing individuals use an interpreter to communicate with anyone in the world over the telephone by the use of a Web cam or video phone. Interpreters may specialize in one avenue or work in multiple settings. They must be versatile, flexible and skilled. Deaf individuals who are able to communicate in a form of signed language other than English or ASL can also become interpreters.<sup>2</sup>

When a deaf or hard of hearing individual expresses the need for a sign language interpreter, it is the responsibility of the entity providing services, employment or entertainment to accommodate that request. Quality of interpreting service is determined by all parties involved. Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, payment for interpreting services usually falls to the host business or organization rather than the deaf person.<sup>3</sup>

### **Professional conduct**

It is the interpreter's sole responsibility to enable deaf or hard of hearing individuals the opportunity to communicate freely with hearing individuals. In order to do this, they must be given enough information about a particular assignment to allow them to determine if it is a situation where they can perform professionally. Content may be shared so the interpreter may determine if she or he has sufficient knowledge or skill to adequately convey the information in both languages. Also, names of participants are shared to ensure that the interpreter is able to work without bias or partiality toward any of the parties involved.

Interpreters strive to remain unbiased toward the content of their work and not alter or modify the meaning or tone of what is conveyed. Interpreters may request materials prior to certain assignments to assist in their preparation. Confidentiality is crucial, and an interpreter is expected to refrain from discussing or disclosing the content of a situation in which he or she interpreted. Aside from court-mandated testimony, an interpreter strictly maintains this confidentiality. RID and the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) have jointly developed the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct which may be seen in its entirety on the RID Web site.

### **Interpreting Credentials**

In the field of interpreting, as in other professions, appropriate credentials are an important indicator of an interpreter's qualifications. RID awards certification to interpreters who successfully pass its national tests. The tests assess language, interpretation and communications skills as well as knowledge, judgment and decision-making skills on issues of ethics, culture and professionalism.

The RID Certification Council oversees the policies of certification and the training of individuals who rate the applicants.

Some currently offered common sign language interpreting certifications are:

- NIC – National Interpreter Certification: Certified, Advanced and Master levels
- CDI – Certified Deaf Interpreter
- CI – Certificate of Interpretation
- CT – Certificate of Transliteration
- OTC – Oral Transliteration Certificate
- SC: L – Specialist Certificate: Legal
- CLIP-R – Conditional Legal Interpreting Permit-Relay

Other certifications recognized by RID:

- MCSC – Master Comprehensive Skills Certificate
- CSC – Comprehensive Skills Certificate
- OIC – Oral Interpreting Certificate
- RSC – Reverse Skills Certificate
- NAD – National Association of the Deaf
  - Level III – Generalist
  - Level IV – Advanced
  - Level V – Master
- IC – Interpretation Certificate
- TC – Transliteration Certificate
- ACCI – American Consortium of Certified Interpreters
- SC: PA – Specialist Certificate: Performance Arts
- CLIP – Conditional Legal Interpreting Permit
- EIPA – Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment

As with any assessment tool, each of these certifications assesses for specific skill sets within the field of interpreting. An interpreter may hold one or more certifications and will be able to offer an explanation of his/her specific certifications. Information on certification is available from RID. To verify an individual interpreter's current certification status, ask for their RID membership card or perform a search on the RID Web site.

### Life Long Learning

Interpreters need to stay current in the field and maintain their skill level. For this reason, RID requires certified members to earn a specific number of continuing education units (CEUs) every four years as part of the Certification Maintenance Program (CMP). The CEU is a nationally recognized unit of measurement for educational activities that meet established criteria for increasing knowledge and competency. Certification retention is dependent upon successful completion of earning the required CEUs. More information on this may be found at the RID Web site.

### Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)

RID has played the leading role in establishing a national standard of quality for interpreters and is committed to continued professionalism in the practice of signed language interpretation. For more information about the profession, certification and interpreting throughout the United States, contact the RID national. Please visit RID's Web site at [www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org).

#### **REFERENCES:**

<sup>1</sup> RID Team Interpreting Standard Practice Paper  
[www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org)

<sup>2</sup> RID Use of a CDI Standard Practice Paper  
[www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org)

<sup>3</sup> ADA link to NAD