



INFORMATION SERIES

What is an American Sign Language (ASL) Interpreter?

Can anyone who signs be an interpreter?

The biggest misconception by the general public is that anyone who has taken classes in American Sign Language (ASL) or Signed English or knows the manual alphabet is qualified to be an interpreter. A Signer is a person who may be able to communicate conversationally with deaf persons but may not necessarily possess the skills and expertise to accurately interpret or function as an interpreter. To become an interpreter, it is necessary not only to be bilingual and bicultural, but to have the ability to mediate meanings across languages and cultures, both simultaneously and consecutively. This takes years of practice and training. In Rhode Island, the RI Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (CDHH) refers out only nationally RID certified interpreters or stated-screened interpreters who are licensed by the state of Rhode Island.

What is the difference between interpreting and transliterating?

Interpreting is the cultural and linguistic transmission of a message from ASL to spoken English, or vice versa. Transliterating is the transmission of a message from spoken English to a visual, manually coded version of English.

What is the role of an interpreter?

It is virtually impossible to be both an active participant and a neutral communication bridge between deaf and hearing persons. For this reason, it is not within the realm of the interpreter's role to advise, edit, advocate, teach, or participate while in the interpreting situation. The interpreter must faithfully transmit the spirit and content of the speakers. Deaf and hearing persons using interpreter services have the right to control the communication interaction and make their own decisions and mistakes.

Do interpreters specialize in certain areas?

Interpreters may have expertise and special training in some areas and not others. For example, some interpreters work primarily in medical settings, while others work mainly in court and legal settings. Familiarity with the subject and vocabulary is crucial for effective interpreting.

Can deaf people become interpreters?

Yes. The professional term is 'relay' or 'intermediary interpreter'. The deaf interpreter works in conjunction with the hearing interpreter. There is a growing need for relay interpreters in critical situations such as court proceedings or psychiatric evaluations or situations where the deaf consumer relies on visual-gestural means to communicate.