



Best Practices for Working with an ASL Interpreter

Introduction

The [New York State Language Access Law](#) requires all state agencies that provide services or benefits directly to the public to offer interpretation services to the person receiving services or benefits in their primary language, including American Sign Language (see [Your Language Access Rights in New York State](#) brochure for more information). Interpretation is the rendering of oral or sign language from one language into another.

Understanding the importance of providing culturally responsive language services, the [New York State Office of Language Access \(OLA\)](#) within the [Office of General Services](#) and the [New York State Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Office](#) within the [Governor's Office of the Chief Disability Officer](#) created this document with best practices for working with an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter and people who are Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing (DDBHH). The contents of this document are meant to be used for reference and may not apply in all situations. Please note, not all people who are DDBHH work with an ASL interpreter, so it's important to ask for their preferred communication mode.

This document has the following sections with considerations and best practices to keep in mind before, during and after ASL interpretation encounters:

1. [Before the Interpretation Encounter](#) (p. 1).
2. [During the Interpretation Encounter](#) (p. 3)
3. [After the Interpretation Encounter](#) (p.4)
4. [Terms and Definitions](#) (p. 5).

Additional resources are available on the [OLA Resources webpage](#), such as the [Person-First and Identity-First Language Glossary](#), and the [ASL Interpretation Video Series](#) and the [Centralized Language Services Contract \(only for authorized users\)](#). For feedback or questions, please email the OLA at LanguageAccess@ogs.ny.gov.

Before the Interpretation Encounter

1. **Always ask first** the Deaf, DeafBlind, or Hard of Hearing (DDBHH) person what their preferred mode of communication is instead of assuming they work with an ASL interpreter.
2. **Decide the type of ASL interpreter(s) needed:**
 - **Certified or Qualified ASL Interpreter** – An ASL interpreter may be referred to as certified or qualified. Ask your ASL interpretation vendor how they screen non-certified interpreters. Just because someone is certified does not mean they are necessarily qualified to do the assignment. Some kinds of encounters may require a certified interpreter, such as a medical or legal type of meeting.
 - i. **Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI)** – A CDI is a Deaf person who is a language specialist. They work as a team with a hearing interpreter who “feeds” them the content being shared to accurately and effectively render the message. It is best practice to work with a CDI when there is a platform assignment that is live



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streamed to a large audience such as a press conference, in emergency preparedness or response situations. A CDI also works with atypical language individuals such as those with developmental disabilities, new Americans or those who have experienced language deprivation and have limited ASL proficiency. Defer to the Deaf person if they request a CDI.

- **Video Remote Interpreting**

- i. **Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)** – When in-person, on-site interpreting services are not immediately available or necessary VRI is an option. VRI uses video conferencing technology, equipment and a high-speed internet connection with sufficient bandwidth to provide the services of a qualified interpreter to people at a different location.
- ii. **Local Remote Interpreting (LRI)** – Interpreters that are local to the DDBHH person requesting services. A DDBHH person may feel most comfortable with an LRI interpreter as it may be someone they have worked with before and familiar with their language. This may be appropriate for settings such as a job interview, where a DDBHH person would feel more comfortable with LRI.

- **Interpretation for DeafBlind (In-Person)**

- i. **Tactile American Sign Language (TASL)** – TASL is an interpreting method for the DeafBlind, by the DeafBlind placing their hand(s) on top of the interpreter's hands to read the signs to receive the message with traditional ASL.
- ii. **Protactile Language (PT)** – PT is quickly growing and recognized as an official language of the DeafBlind (DB) community. It is not signed only in the hands but also on the body. It is a language based fully on touch. PT is common in the DB community now. As in all situations, we should ask the DB person what their primary/preferred mode of communication is. For more information on PTASL, view this [PBS documentary](#).
- iii. **Haptics** – A standardized system for providing and or receiving visual and environmental information as well as social feedback via touch signals on the body. Haptics can be provided in combination with ASL interpretation to provide more information to the DeafBlind individual.

3. **Decide interpretation mode:**

- **Consecutive Interpreting** – Speaker and interpreter take turns. This is most often used where the most accurate messaging is necessary (such as legal and medical settings). The meeting may take twice as long as it would in only English. Here is a [video further explaining Consecutive and Simultaneous interpretation](#), which includes examples.
- **Simultaneous Interpreting** – Speaker and interpreter speak/sign at the same time without pausing for each other. This is best for group settings and at large events such as town halls, where the interpreter is near the presenter for all attendees to see and signing to the audience. Depending on the length and technical nature of the meeting, two or more interpreters may be required.

4. **Decide on in-person interpreter vs. video remote interpreter (virtual meeting).** In general, if everyone is in-person the interpreter should also be in-person. Likewise, if everyone is remote, the interpreter could work remotely. However, it is always best to ask the DDBHH person what they prefer. For example, a DeafBlind person who only works with a TASL interpreter would



require in-person interpreters.

5. **Consider appropriate lighting for interpreter visibility and background image complexity.** **Please speak at a normal pace.** It is important for the interpreter to be seen and for the person taking in the visual information to have lower visual complexity behind the interpreter, which may be to reduce strain to their eyes to see the message. Avoid visually “noisy” backgrounds with patterns or many different elements with color. If the lights must be lowered for the event, make sure the interpreter is still lit. It helps everyone when you speak in your normal tone and in segments to establish a rhythm and general pace. The interpreter will ask you to slow down or pause if needed.
6. **Provide the interpreter(s) with event information and materials**, such as an on-site point of contact with phone number, address of site, room number, parking information, zoom link, list of potential acronyms, speaker scripts, prepared text, presentation slides, handouts, glossaries, etc.
7. **Inform building security that the interpreter and/or the DDBHH is arriving (if meeting is in-person).**

ASL Interpreters, regardless of certification, must adhere to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) [Code of Professional Conduct](#) (CPC). A grievance can be made to the [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc.](#) if there is a concern about an interpreter who has violated the CPC. Anyone can file a grievance, a DDBHH person, or another interpreter.

During the Interpretation Encounter

Note: Please share the below tips with the team/contact that will work with the interpreter.

1. **Brief the interpreter** on who you are and the meeting topic:
 - “I am [name, job title and office]. I am speaking to someone about [topic]. I will be asking questions on [topic].”
2. **Use plain language** and avoid jargon, colloquialism, technical terms, or acronyms. If any of these must be used, provide an explanation that may be interpreted.
3. **Ask the DDBHH person if they understand or have questions** throughout the conversation.
4. **Do not have side conversations with the interpreter or other staff** as everything you say will be interpreted. Also, the interpreter and the DDBHH person should not engage in a side conversation.
5. **Do not ask for the interpreter’s personal opinion or to counsel the DDBHH person.** The interpreter may help advocate on behalf of the DDBHH person, in the event of an immediate and serious risk or to express cultural differences when appropriate (see the next bullet point,



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#6). Otherwise, interpreters must remain impartial, provide accurate interpretation, and maintain confidentiality without allowing their opinion to affect the interpretation.

6. **Rephrase a question/statement, if requested by the interpreter, when a current phrasing is not culturally responsive.** Professional interpreters are familiar with the culture and customs for the language being interpreted.
7. **Slow down when reading from a script in order** to allow the interpreter to keep up.
8. **Check in with the Deaf person about where they prefer the interpreter to be placed.** This is discussed between the Deaf person and the interpreter prior to the start of the meeting/event.
9. **Speak directly to the DDBHH person, not to the interpreter.**
 - Ask “What is your name?” and not “Please ask them for their name.”
10. **Look out for signs that the interpretation may not be going well.** Not all conversations will go smoothly. Below are some signs to keep in mind:
 - The interpreter repeatedly asks for clarification.
 - The exchange between the interpreter and the DDBHH person is either much longer or much shorter than what is being interpreted.
 - The DDBHH person repeatedly corrects the interpreter.
 - The DDBHH person appears to disagree with the interpreter.
 - The interpreter or the DDBHH person becomes impatient or shows signs of frustration (which can be deescalated by taking a break to clarify and address with the interpreter).

After the Interpretation Encounter

1. **Ask the DDBHH person for feedback** after the job is over. It’s important to get feedback from the DDBHH person on their experience, along with their preferred and non-preferred interpreters.
2. **Provide feedback to the interpretation vendor.** Constructive feedback with interpreters is encouraged. For issues, work with vendors to resolve.
3. **Do not discuss confidential information** outside of the meeting. For example, if information is needed to apply for benefits, the information should not be shared outside of the application/process to receive benefits.



Terms and Definitions

1. **American Sign Language (ASL)** – A sign language developed and used in the US, and also used in Canada, that uses hands, face and body movements to communicate instead of spoken words. Please note, there are many varieties of sign language used in different regions such as British Sign Language, French Sign Language, and Chinese Sign Language.
2. **Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI)** – A Deaf person who is a language specialist and has been certified by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf as an interpreter. They work as a team with a hearing interpreter who “feeds” them the content being shared to accurately and effectively render the message. A CDI also works with people who have atypical language skills such as those with developmental disabilities, new Americans, or those who have experienced language deprivation that may have led to limited ASL proficiency.
3. **Code of Professional Conduct (CPC)** – Formerly known as the Code of Ethics, [the CPC](#) are seven tenets setting forth the guiding principles for professional behavior for ASL interpreters.
4. **Consecutive Interpreting** – A mode of interpretation where the speaker and interpreter take turns speaking. This is most often used when the most accurate messaging is necessary like legal and medical settings. The meeting may take twice as long as it would in only English. Here is a [video further explaining Consecutive and Simultaneous interpretation](#), which includes examples.
5. **Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing (DDBHH)** – People who are Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing may have very little or no hearing, have combined hearing and vision loss, and/or may not be able to hear well due to partial hearing loss.
6. **Haptics** – A standardized system for providing and or receiving visual information, environmental information, and social feedback via touch signals on the body. Haptics can be provided in combination with ASL interpretation to provide more information to the DeafBlind individual.
7. **Local Remote Interpreting (LRI)** – Interpreters that are local to the DDBHH person requesting services and appearing via remote video conferencing. This is someone the DDBHH person may feel most comfortable with as it may be someone they have worked with before and who is familiar with their needs.
8. **Protactile Language (PT)** – A growing language and recognized as an official language of the DeafBlind community. It is a language based fully on touch and signed by using the hands to touch on the body of the person being communicated with. For more information on PT, view this [PBS documentary](#).
9. **Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)** – [The RID](#) is the national certifying body of sign language interpreters that serve the members, profession, and the public by promoting and advocating for qualified and effective interpreters in all spaces where intersectional diverse Deaf lives are impacted.



10. **Simultaneous Interpreting** – A mode of interpretation where the Speaker and interpreter speak/sign at the same time without pausing for each other. This is best for group settings and at large events such as town halls, where the interpreter is near the presenter for all attendees to see while signing to the audience. Depending on the length and technical nature of the meeting, two or more interpreters may be required.

11. **Tactile American Sign Language (TASL)** – An interpreting method for DeafBlind that uses touch to convey the message. For example, a person who is DeafBlind may place their hand(s) on top of the interpreter’s hands to read the signs through touch.

12. **Video Remote Interpretation (VRI)** – An interpretation service that allows video conferencing for sign and spoken languages, with the interpreter joining with their web camera or videophone.