

Deaf and hearing interpreting teams vary across the United States, depending on your area. Some areas use Deaf and hearing teams quite often, approaching it as a best practice depending on the situational need, as language access to Deaf consumers. Other areas will use Deaf and hearing teams for only specific situations, such as mental health, independent living, or Deaf/blind situations.

The interpreting community recognizes it is best practice for complete access for our Deaf consumers. The interpreting community is good about recognizing the need for a Deaf team and might have systems in place to get one easily. This should be the case regardless of your place of work, whether it be a big city or rural area. It is our responsibility as interpreters to grow pockets, where the use of Deaf interpreters is not best practice. It's up to us to create a pool of trained deaf interpreters. It is also important that hearing interpreters know how to team with deaf interpreters, practicing together often so when the time arises, they are comfortable working with each other. That relationship is crucial to create a successful interpreting scenario. It is important especially if the Deaf interpreter is new to the profession and learning best practices.

It is important for a new interpreter to network to learn what the interpreting field looks like in your area. If you are a new interpreter, finding opportunities can be challenging. However, if surrounding communities partnered together with interpreting agencies Deaf schools, interpreting training programs, agencies, and Deaf organizations, they can grow a pool of trained Deaf interpreters as well as a pool of hearing interpreters who are familiar with how to work with Deaf interpreters. They will also know how to advocate in case a Deaf interpreter is necessary for any given situation as well as know how to request a Deaf team once they recognize when one is necessary. It is critical to ask appropriately to convince the paying entity that it is worth their time and money to send a Deaf Interpreter.

Some Deaf communities are new to the concept of having a Deaf interpreter, but we are seeing Deaf Interpreters more often in situations such as TV or the internet for informational purposes, but on the local level it's still a new concept. Some Deaf communities aren't quite sure how a Deaf interpreter can interpret for their medical appointments. This can be tricky when they feel they want to ask for a Deaf interpreter. It's up to us to educate the Deaf interpreter, community and partner with institutions in hosting events, activities and trainings so that everyone can be comfortable and familiar with the concept of a Deaf interpreter.

I'll share a few good examples. The first one was in Milwaukee about 30 years ago. There was an independent living center with a Deaf caseworker. The Independent Living Center decided that it was best practices to create an accessible environment. But they weren't sure how to educate the community. For a year, they decided that anyone who wanted could ask for a Deaf and hearing team if there was any event someone could request that it had a Deaf and hearing team or the agency would send a Deaf team. For any event scheduled they would request a deaf team. They did this trial for about a year. Deaf people would request a Deaf team for doctor's appointments just to try it out and see how it went. These Deaf Interpreters would work in the prison system, doctor's appointments, education, any formal presentation community events, etc. People started to see these Deaf interpreters everywhere and they noticed a huge difference in comprehension. After the year trial, Deaf individuals knew that they could request deaf interpreters. Different institutions knew that they could request Deaf and hearing teams and were willing to pay extra for that. Within only one year, the community at large became very aware of this concept. The Independent Living Center was willing to collaborate with the agency to create this huge exposure, and now Wisconsin is one of the leading states in the country in the use of Deaf and hearing team interpreters.

Another good example is in the state of Indiana. About four years ago the community realized they only had a few Deaf interpreters but they could see the huge benefit in utilizing them. Because these interpreters also had full time jobs, it was difficult to find interpreters when needed. The community realized that they needed to train more Deaf Interpreters as well as grow a pool of more diverse interpreters. The School for the Deaf, an interpreting agency, along with the state's Deaf organization collaborated with Sorensen's Deaf Interpreter Academy to host an "Orientation to Deaf and Hearing Teams Workshop." Anyone in the community who was curious about this topic could come. Deaf people came. Interpreters came. Deaf individuals who wanted to become Deaf interpreters came. During the workshop we talked about what kinds of situations should have a Deaf and hearing interpreter team as well as how to identify such situations. We discussed how to justify the need for Deaf and hearing teams. We created a fishbowl mock interpreting situation where the participants could watch a Deaf and hearing interpreting team in action. They discussed where to stand and how to situate themselves. We created different scenarios for group practice so they could get a feel for that kind of work. In the beginning, everyone thought that this would be an easy endeavor, but quickly realized it was a bit of a challenge. Interpreters who didn't understand why they needed to work with Deaf teams quickly learned the benefit and saw how communication was easy and clear. It seemed to have a positive impact on everyone.

That open invitation to the workshop led to in person and online training for new Deaf interpreters. We had about 20 Deaf Interpreters take this training. It was just the first step in a 6-month mentoring and training program. The community hosted a mentoring session with these new deaf interpreters. They provided support, introduced ethical scenarios, discussed best practices, hosted workshops about business practices, decision making, interpreting processes etc. Later on, we hosted another training for hearing and Deaf interpreters, on how to "feed" during the interpreting process. The participants practiced that teaming process. From that, they were able to attend a practice session with hands on experience for what they learned during the workshop. We then set up observational opportunities for the Deaf interpreters to observe Deaf interpreters at work. Over a four-year time period, we hosted various trainings and workshops, and we noticed this shift in the perspective of using deaf interpreters. Over the four years we have noticed Indiana interpreters will have work almost on a daily basis. Agencies now have a Deaf scheduler. Deaf interpreters are starting to train the agency on how to justify the use of a Deaf team and recognize when one should be used in scenarios such as legal situations, Child Protective Services medical appointments. In big public events the agency can now justify the use of a Deaf team and they have now become the gatekeeper to providing work for Deaf interpreters. Hearing interpreters are now more aware and are comfortable with working with Deaf interpreters in our pool of Deaf interpreters and the practice is growing. Yes, we absolutely need to grow more. But the community has decided that they are willing to invest in this growth and we have seen a transformation and a positive change systematically.

Is this something you want to try in your area? Are there institutions who are willing to partner with you? Deaf Interpreter Academy would be happy to work with you. We have resources ready.

We have workshops, PowerPoints, materials ready and we can consult with you on how to host workshops in your area and be included in different events that will have a big impact on your community to grow the awareness. We would love to be involved in growing your pool of trained Deaf interpreters as well as train hearing interpreters on how to partner with Deaf interpreters. With this education the awareness will spread to interpreter training programs and Deaf organizations in creating a partnership to create even more opportunity. If a community invests, a community will transform.