Scheduling a Sign Language Interpreter

by Marcia Sarnowski

At a recent workshop, our attendees had several questions about scheduling sign language interpreters for library programs. I contacted Carolyn Small, Western Regional Coordinator, Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, at the Regional office in Eau Claire, who provided information and resources for this article.

Public libraries are considered Title II (government) entities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As such, they are required to make their programs and services accessible to persons with disabilities. This includes providing interpreters for library events, programs, and meetings, upon request.

An interpreter is a professional who serves as a communication link between people who are deaf and use manual communication, most often American Sign Language (ASL) and those who are hearing who are not able to communicate directly using manual communication. As with any language, years of training and practical use are needed to develop fluency. It is important to understand that an interpreter is not merely an individual with signing skills.

Here are some of the questions I have had from librarians, and answers to them:

How much notice is necessary to schedule an interpreter?

> Interpreter availability varies widely throughout the state. In some areas, interpreters can be secured on short notice; in other areas, it may take one

or two weeks to schedule a qualified person. Deaf and hard of hearing patrons who use interpreter services are likely aware of the time needed to arrange for the service, in their home areas. Libraries can raise public awareness of the need for advance notice by posting a statement like this on their program and meeting notices: "Sign language interpreters are available upon request. Please call [the library number] or 7-1-1 [the Wisconsin Telecommunications Relay System (WTRS) toll-free number], or send an email message to [library director], 48 hours in advance."

How does a library find an interpreter to hire?

It is always best to consult first with the consumer making the request to determine his/her preference. You might ask the consumer these questions:

- Do you use American Sign Language or a more English-based signing mode?

- Do you have a preference for a particular interpreter?

- If we are not able to find an interpreter, what alternative accommodation might work for you?

Interpreters can be hired through a referral agency, and there are interpreters who work as free agents. Fees for hiring through a referral agency will generally be higher than contracting directly with a freelance interpreter but could be a real time saver as the hiring agency makes one phone call instead of many. You can find a list of Wisconsin referral agencies here:

http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/sensory/Interpreting/terpagencies.htm

You can find the link to the Wisconsin Freelance Interpreter List, arranged by county of residence, here:

http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/sensory/Interpreting/InterpreterDirectory.htm

What does it cost to hire an interpreter?

Interpreters are self-employed service providers and establish their own fees and business practices. If an interpreting assignment is expected to take more than two hours, two interpreters are usually required. It is standard practice for interpreters to bill a two-hour minimum, portal to portal.

I contacted a Wisconsin referral agency in preparing this article, and was informed that interpreters associated with their service receive $58.00 per hour with a two-hour minimum, and after that the time is billed in quarter-hour increments. This does not include travel time, which is charged at the hourly rate. Those who work as free agents may have a different fee schedule. The website of the Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing advises, "It is recommended that when you secure an interpreter, you agree on billing terms prior to the assignment."

Technological advancement has now made it possible to hire interpreters remotely using videoconferencing equipment or even video programs such as Skype.   This is often referred to as VRI, Video Remote Interpreting.   An advantage to using remote services is that the hiring agency pays for interpreter time only—not travel time or other travel costs. For the use of VRI the deaf and hearing persons are in the same room and the interpreter is at a call center, possibly in another city. VRI is also known as "Interpreting Online" or "IO."   Here is a link to a Wisconsin agency that provides VRI services:
http://www.interpretingsolutionsinc.com/default.asp

Can the library use interpreters from states other than Wisconsin, if they might be closer to the library?

Yes, although geography cannot be used as justification to not hire an interpreter. For example, the Department of Justice does not consider two hours of travel time one-way unreasonable in areas where interpreter availability is limited or non-existent. This is another good reason to look into remote services. Most states will have a deaf- hard of hearing services division. Here is a link to the one in Minnesota: www.interpreterreferral.org

What else should libraries know about hiring an interpreter?

If you receive a request for an interpreter, be sure to document your efforts to secure one. Whether you are working with a referral agency or a freelance interpreter, call as far in advance of the event as possible, and be prepared to provide the following information:

· Date, time, and length of the event
· Location, including address, room number and directions
· Names of all participants [if a meeting, the names of board or committee members who may be speaking; if a program, provide the names of the presenters]
· Purpose and description of the event
· Name, address and phone number of person or organization to be billed

If the event ends early, you will be billed for the entire time scheduled. If cancellation is necessary, most agencies require several days' notice (e.g. two business days) or you will be billed for the entire time scheduled.

One of the Wisconsin referral agencies has provided a helpful list of "Tips for Working with an Interpreter": http://www.cdhh.org/interpreter_tips_0001.pdf

Finally, how can libraries pay for this service if it's not in the budget?

If there are no currently budgeted funds, and there is an immediate need,

> you may wish to approach a local service group or community foundation with a request for a specific amount which can be designated to fund this service, which is part of providing access to the valuable services offered by the library. In planning future budgets, designate a line for "ADA access" expenses, to be used for equipment and services needed to meet the costs of requested accommodations.

An important element of accessibility is "attitude"; a request for participation in a library event by a patron you haven't met before can mean that your messages about "service to all" and the "value of library services" are being received. Viewing this as a positive development, rather than as a burden, can reinforce the library's role as a vital, inclusive participant at the community table.

For more information about the Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, visit this url: http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/sensory/INDEX.HTM

For a map of the counties served by each region, look here: http://dhs.wisconsin.gov/sensory/Staff/DSL-regions.htm

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