



When sign language interpreting services are provided to customers of a company, or to consumers who use government services, is it possible for the customer/consumer to choose a specific, preferred interpreter?

My Role

I've been profoundly Deaf all of my life, and I've faced many situations that are challenging as I use my rights to communication accessibility. As a nationally-recognized and highly-qualified Deaf Interpreter Educator, I work with interpreters who practice under my guidance, take my suggestions, and become empowered to gain skills. However, a company or an agency may see me as a simply general Deaf person who isn't familiar with business, linguistics, and communication qualifications. This can represent a problem.

I have dedicated my life to training sign language interpreters, and I teach them how to handle self-employment and employment within companies and agencies. This gives me a unique perspective on interpreter qualifications.

In my professional position, I don't mind working with any and all interpreters. However, for my personal appointments, I prefer to have an interpreter who I have worked with on a regular basis. I want someone who I am confident knows how to successfully provide communication access, whether working in a situation with children, attorneys, doctors, or hospitals.

Communication Accessibility

To my understanding, communication accessibility requires the availability of a sign language interpreter who has the skills necessary to fit a situation. Prominent Deaf people sometimes select their own interpreters, and extended time is not necessary for these interpreters to be provided. I take the position that the same rights should be extended to all Deaf consumers.

It is surely no surprise when a Deaf person shares their experiences to warn Deaf communities about situations where interpreters may be unable to meet communication needs.

Long-Time Relationship vs. One-Time Relationship

If a Deaf person requests an interpreter who has long worked together with that Deaf person, working together as a team, this situation leads to communication access. Interpreter selection should not be in the hands of someone who is in authority but who has no knowledge of interpreter qualifications.

It is surely no surprise when a Deaf person shares their experiences to warn Deaf communities about situations where interpreters may be unable to meet communication needs. It is vitally important that the Deaf consumer is given the power to select a preferred interpreter for full communication access. If a Deaf consumer requests a specific interpreter with whom they are familiar, this request should be respected. When hearing people do not respect a Deaf person's request for a specific interpreter, communication access may not be provided. This situation does not show respect for Deaf consumers.

Consumer Preferences vs. Organizational Preferences

Communication accessibility succeeds when a preferred interpreter is provided. For ANY situation - one-to-one or at a group meeting – a Deaf person/Deaf people may want to select an interpreter who can work together as a team. It is a mess when an interpreter is selected without any input from a Deaf person. This interpreter may not do a good job and may ruin a special day. If an interpreter does not have the skills to work with a Deaf consumer/consumers, it is better to change to another interpreter.

Expectations vs. Reality

Perhaps an interpreter who you already know shows up out of the blue. This can easily happen because the Deaf world is "a small world" but what if you do not want to work with this interpreter.

- Perhaps a certain interpreter is widely viewed as "a bad apple" in the interpreting field.
- Perhaps a certain interpreter tends to invade the privacy of the Deaf consumer.
- Perhaps a certain interpreter behaves unprofessionally, acting as a controlling person.
- Perhaps a male interpreter shows up to work with a private female situation.
- Perhaps an administrative choice brings an interpreter who is unqualified to succeed in a specific situation. This can cause rescheduling problems that waste time.
- Perhaps a particular interpreter is unaware of the Deaf person's communication style
- In all of these circumstances, problems may easily be solved when a specific interpreter requested by a Deaf person can be brought in to provide appropriate communication accessibility. Each Deaf consumer should have choice in these matters.

Interpreter Requests vs. Contracted Interpreters

Why can't a Deaf person make a simple request for an interpreter? Whenever I've requested an interpreter for an upcoming important day, I had to wait for approval over several months. When a particular interpreter cannot provide communication-specific appropriate services, such as American Sign Language, in contrast to English-based signing, then communication accessibility has not been provided. Why should hospitals, other organizations, and companies have policies, contracts, and agencies assigning interpreters, when these interpreters may not be available in a timely manner, and may not have the skills to provide full communication accessibility? These kinds of limitations do not make sense to me as a Deaf person.

A Deaf person should be able to request a specific interpreter, or at least, an interpreter with specific sign language capabilities, and have this interpreter available on specific dates. Deaf persons' individual communication styles should be accommodated. Respect for individuality should be a basic feature of all organizations providing interpreting services. Shouldn't Deaf people have rights in interpreter selection?

A lot of us tend to make an effort to shift our communication style to fit an interpreter's skills. However, interpreters who are not qualified to use a Deaf person's usual style - such as ASL - should not be assigned to work with that Deaf person. Trying to get communication accessibility as the law defines it can be extremely difficult. Qualified interpreters preferred by Deaf consumers should be provided in a timely manner.