

# INTERPRETING FOR INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE DEAF-BLIND

*The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., (RID) Standard Practice Paper (SPP) provides a framework of basic, respectable standards for RID members' professional work and conduct with consumers. This paper also provides specific information about the practice setting. This document is intended to raise awareness, educate, guide and encourage sound basic methods of professional practice. The SPP should be considered by members in arriving at an appropriate course of action with respect to their practice and professional conduct.*

*It is hoped that the standards will promote commitment to the pursuit of excellence in the practice of interpreting and be used for public distribution and advocacy.*

## Individuals who are Deaf-Blind

The spectrum of consumers who utilize Deaf-Blind interpreting services consists of individuals with differing degrees of vision loss and hearing loss. The amount and type of vision and hearing a person has determines the type of interpreting that will be most effective for that individual. Environmental factors must be taken into account in order for effective communication to take place. In addition, many Deaf-Blind individuals require support service providers (defined below) in order to fully access the environment. Each of these factors, as well as considerations for hiring interpreters, is explained below.

There is a continuum of vision and hearing loss among people who are Deaf-Blind. Persons within this community are not necessarily fully deaf or fully blind. Some Deaf-Blind people have a substantial amount of usable vision while others have little (limited vision and/or legally blind) or no usable vision (blind). The same is true regarding the degree of hearing. Individuals may be hard-of-hearing with usable hearing while others are profoundly deaf. The range and degree of both hearing loss and vision loss will determine critical communication factors between the consumer and the interpreter.

Factors that contribute to the diversity in communication within the Deaf-Blind community include:

- type, degree and age of onset of hearing and vision loss
- whether current vision and/or hearing is stable, progressive or fluctuating
- level of language competencies in American Sign Language (ASL) or other signed language systems and/or English
- family, ethnic, socio-economic and educational backgrounds
- physical, cognitive or other disabilities

## Interpreting for Deaf-Blind Individuals

The type and extent of the combined hearing and vision loss determines an individual's mode of communication and needs regarding visual accommodations. Individuals who are Deaf-Blind employ one or more of the following communication modes:

- sign language at close visual range (less than 4 feet) and/or within a limited visual space (often a small area including and just below the signer's chin to signer's chest)
- sign language at a greater visual range (4-8 feet) to accommodate those individuals with limited peripheral vision
- sign language received at close visual range with the use of tracking [hand(s) is/are placed on the interpreter's wrists/forearms for the receiver to maintain signs within their visual range]

- sign language received by sense of touch with one or two hands (tactile)
- fingerspelling received by sense of touch (tactile)
- Print-on-Palm (block letters drawn on the palm)
- speechreading at close visual range
- hearing with assistive listening devices
- reading via text-based devices and services (e.g., real-time captioning connected to a large visual display or refreshable Braille output)
- sign supported speech

Experienced interpreters who work with Deaf-Blind people are knowledgeable about and sensitive to environmental factors that may significantly affect the interpreting process. Skilled Deaf-Blind interpreters are able to incorporate the speaker's message while also transmitting visual, auditory and environmental stimuli that contribute to the context of the interpreted message.

Dependent on the Deaf-Blind consumer's preference, the following components should be considered and may be incorporated during to the beginning of the meeting/workshop/conference:

- the layout of the room (position of windows, color of walls/platform background, tables, chairs, doors)
- specific visual background (signer's shirt in contrast to skin color, high-necked collar, minimal jewelry/accessories)
- seating positions (need for distance or proximity; logistics for teaming)
- auditory factors (background noise; use of assistive listening devices)
- identify who is speaking and location of the speaker
- the speaker's emotional affect and gestures
- unspoken actions and reactions of people in the room
- information from handouts, Powerpoint slides, other audiovisual materials
- when a person enters or exits the room

The amount of information incorporated is at the discretion of the Deaf-Blind consumer and also requires considerable skill and judgment on the part of the interpreter.

### Arranging for interpreting services

A person who is Deaf-Blind presents unique circumstances for gathering information about the world around him or her as well as the people and interactions encompassed within it. Interpreters and support service providers (SSPs) are often the essential link to the array of information people who are Deaf-Blind need in order to be informed, active participants within society. Careful matching of a qualified interpreter and a consumer who is Deaf-Blind is critical so that the intricate and individualized interpreting needs are met.

Interpreters must be versatile and flexible because of the unique communication needs of Deaf-Blind individuals. For the same reason, the ratio of interpreters to consumers must be appropriate so that these needs can be satisfactorily met. The number of Deaf-Blind individuals in an environment will greatly influence the number of interpreters or interpreting teams that will be needed.

In situations involving one Deaf-Blind individual, only one interpreter or interpreter team may be needed. When two or more Deaf-Blind individuals are present, more teams may be required. For example, one team might interpret via tactile sign language (hand-over-hand communication) with a single consumer, while another team may interpret at close visual range with a group of two to four consumers and yet another team may provide audible interpretation using an FM system. Team interpreting is standard practice for any event of an hour or more in duration and/or because of the complexity of content or for platform situations.

Another reason two or more interpreters may be needed is that interpreting with Deaf-Blind persons can be physically and mentally demanding, which may require frequent rest breaks or relief (in addition to their teaming responsibilities). For assignments under one hour with a person with close or low vision, one interpreter may be sufficient though the need for additional rest times should be considered. Any assignment with a tactile consumer with duration over thirty minutes however, should utilize a team of two interpreters due to the physical demands of that type of communication.

An interpreting team may include one or more interpreters who are deaf. In these instances, the deaf interpreter receives the speaker's message visually (either from the speaker directly or through another interpreter), processes the message, and then transmits it in a style that is suitable to that particular Deaf-Blind individual.

Professional standards of practice when arranging for interpreting services include:

- asking for consumer preferences regarding communication mode(s) and specific interpreter(s)
- engaging interpreters who are skilled in working with Deaf-Blind consumers
- engaging an appropriate number of interpreters
- agreeing on the specific role and responsibilities of the interpreter prior to the event
- arranging for any special communication equipment needed (e.g. microphones, FM systems)
- ensuring that the visual environment is conducive to communication for the Deaf-Blind participant(s)
- ensuring that the interpreters hired wear clothing which is in high contrast to their skin tone and with a crew neckline or higher; clothing material should not be made of shiny or patterned fabric or be heavily buttoned and should not reflect light
- ensuring that the interpreters hired minimize the use of jewelry and accessories
- allowing 15 to 30 minutes prior to the assignment to establish communication, rapport and preferences before interpreting begins
- note that not all interpreters are qualified to work with Deaf-Blind consumers

### **Support Service Providers**

Individuals who are Deaf-Blind may request additional services that are not typically associated with interpreting for individuals who are deaf. For example, an individual may wish to receive an orientation to a conference hall where they will be attending activities for the day, ask that someone be available to function as a guide to the restroom or request assistance through a buffet. These types of services are often performed by a SSP, a specially-trained guide who is familiar with the Deaf-Blind person's communication needs and is able to provide environmental information and assistance before, during and/or after a scheduled event takes place. Qualified interpreters accepting assignments with deaf-blind consumers should be aware of and sensitive to these potential needs. It must be noted that while interpreters can often function as SSPs, it is not the case that a SSP is necessarily a qualified interpreter; although they may be able to facilitate brief, informal communication.