

VIDEO RELAY SERVICE INTERPRETING

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.

About Video Relay Service Interpreting

Video relay service (VRS) is a free telephone relay service using video technology to allow deaf and hard of hearing persons to make and receive phone calls using American Sign Language (ASL). VRS, as an industry, has grown exponentially since its inception in 2000 as an offshoot of traditional Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) or text-based relay services. It is estimated that more than 4,000 sign language interpreters have worked in this setting. VRS companies provide millions of minutes of interpreting services per month, and given its current rate of growth, VRS will continue to be a viable employment setting for sign language interpreters into the future.

The basic requirements for using VRS are a monitor, a video camera device and a broadband (high-speed) internet connection.ⁱ Each VRS company has its own particular system that is required to be interoperable, allowing consumers to access any company's service no matter what equipment they have. There are likely to be additional applications, such as enhanced services for customers who are deaf-blind. Because technology is ever changing and rapidly improving, RID anticipates increases in the volume and desire for the service.

VRS services are regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)ⁱⁱ. The FCC is responsible for managing reimbursement rates from the Interstate TRS Fund, which is funded by interstate telephone companies throughout the United States. The FCC is responsible for setting standards that VRS companies and their interpreters must follow when handling calls. These regulations help to ensure that VRS calls are handled efficiently, appropriately and ethically. VRS providers must comply with the rules set forth by the FCC in order to be reimbursed for the calls they relay. The goal of TRS, and thus VRS, is to provide telecommunications access for deaf, hard of hearing and speech disabled individuals in a manner functionally equivalent to traditional voice telephone users.

The FCC puts forth the following provisions for VRS providersⁱⁱⁱ:

- General VRS telephone communication access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week is mandated;^{iv}
- Speed of Answer Rule - by January 1, 2007, VRS providers must answer 80 percent of all VRS calls within 120 seconds, measured on a monthly basis;^v
- The ability to place calls to 911 services. Currently, access to 911 is waived for VRS providers until 1/1/2008;^{vi}
- If Spanish to ASL services are offered, they must be accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;^{vii}
- Video mail services, which are services similar to voice mail but in sign, are reimbursable. Video mail is not mandated by the FCC.^{viii}

The FCC also limits use of this free system to phone calls and does not intend the service to be used to replace on-site interpreting for meetings.^{ix} As such the FCC requires that all deaf and hearing participants be in separate locations.^x

The Role of the Interpreter

VRS cannot function without skilled, capable interpreters. RID plays a leading role in establishing a national standard of quality for interpreters by providing education and certification through the National Testing System. The process of becoming a highly qualified interpreter starts with attaining credentials through certifications offered by RID and maintaining qualifications through continued skill development. RID believes that national certification must be the minimum standard for qualification of VRS interpreters. RID also encourages the use of Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI) as team interpreters to assist with the demanding nature of the work involved with VRS interpreting.

Each VRS company employs sign language interpreters through direct employment as employees or independent contractors or through agreements with sign language interpreting agencies. VRS interpreters are currently working full time or part time shifts to assure VRS services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

VRS has attracted many interpreters who previously worked in community settings. While the advent of VRS interpreting has opened up new telecommunication options for the Deaf community, it has done so at some loss of adequate availability of interpreters in community settings. Recruitment of VRS interpreters has led to a supply-and-demand phenomenon that has meant higher salaries for not only video interpreters; the entire field has had to adjust to the rise in salary ranges to retain interpreters in community and educational settings. RID remains steadfast in its commitment to the needs of the community and to promoting a balanced approach to the provision of interpreting services in all arenas. Furthermore, RID remains committed to those practices and standards that will promote career longevity for interpreters so that the valued resources of qualified interpreters for this highly specialized arena will not be prematurely or unnecessarily depleted.

Never before, in the history of the interpreting profession, have interpreters worked in settings where the federal government and large corporations have played such an important role in the provision of interpreting services. The FCC has defined VRS interpreters as ‘communication assistants’ (CA), using language from TRS regulations. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and later FCC regulations, interpreters working in the VRS setting must be “qualified.” The FCC states that VRS interpreters must be able to “interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially, both receptively and expressively, using any necessary specialized vocabulary.”^{xi} The interpreter as a professional has the responsibility to assess the communication needs of consumers and render the message using the interpreting service model and interpreting techniques that are most appropriate for the communication needs of the consumers. In addition, interpreters working in the VRS arena must be readily prepared for working in an environment with diverse cultural groups including deaf and hearing people of color, hearing consumers with varying cultures and accents as well as colloquial differences found in different regions of the United States.

RID urges VRS providers and interpreters to work together to ensure quality interpreting services, professional standards and practices and a safe and healthy work environment. The following issues should be addressed when discussing best practices for working in the VRS setting:

Interpreter preparation: Industry standards and best practices suggest that interpreters are most successful when they are able to obtain information about the subject of an interpreted conversation in advance because interpreters exercise professional judgment and make decisions based, in part, on this information. While the FCC does not prohibit the gathering of such information by a VRS interpreter prior to placing a call, this is not a common policy among VRS providers.^{xii} RID supports the practice of interpreters obtaining necessary information in order to process calls appropriately.

Teaming: The RID Standard Practice Paper on Team Interpreting explains factors involved in determining the need for a team interpreter. These factors include the length of the assignment, the complexity of the interpreted content, the dynamics of the setting and possible unique needs of the persons receiving the interpreting services.^{xiii} In VRS settings, there are times when it is necessary to request a team interpreter for assistance. Additionally, RID supports the use of Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDIs) within call centers as another resource to ensure functional equivalency.^{xiv}

Working Conditions: In VRS call centers, the following workplace concerns have been identified: repetitive movement injuries, eye strain, muscle strain, weight gain and physical and mental fatigue. Additionally, the intimate nature of VRS work can lead to emotional strain or vicarious trauma. RID recommends established policies for breaks in order to prevent or minimize the negative effects of the physical, mental and emotional demands of the VRS environment.

Training: Because of the complex and dynamic nature of VRS, ongoing training related to the technology as well as interpreting skill sets specific to the VRS setting is needed.

Cultural Competency: VRS interpreters work with consumers from different geographical and cultural backgrounds. Because culture is inextricably tied to language, interpreters must develop cultural competency as well as understanding of language variations for both signed and spoken languages. Variations can be seen in word meaning, accents and speed of production. Managing these differences skillfully can be challenging for interpreters.

The Role of RID

RID is the national professional organization for sign language interpreters in the United States and, as such, advocates for its members by promoting the profession and advocating for increased quality, qualification and quantity of interpreters through a triad of services.^{xv}

- **National Testing System (NTS)** strives to maintain strict adherence to nationally recognized testing industry standards of validity, reliability, equity and legal defensibility.
- **Certification Maintenance Program (CMP)** is the avenue through which the continued skill development of certified interpreters/transliterators is monitored.
- **Ethical Practices System (EPS) and NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct (CPC)** are two vehicles that provide guidance and enforcement of professionalism and conduct. The EPS provides an opportunity for consumers and colleagues to address concerns or file complaints regarding the quality of interpreter/transliterator services, and the CPC sets the standards to which all individuals holding RID certification are expected to adhere.

RID serves as a liaison between the interpreting community and stakeholders in VRS. Working in partnership with Deaf organizations, advisory groups and the FCC, issues relating to the provision of VRS services are addressed at the national level. RID's membership makes up the largest pool of interpreters working in the industry, and its members serve as the experts in the field in terms of working conditions, self-care and self-advocacy.

RID views the interpreters who work in the VRS setting as professionals with the rights and responsibilities necessary to assist in helping to steer the future course of video relay service provision. In addition, RID makes the following recommendations to those involved in the field of VRS interpreting.

Recommendations:

The primary recommendation is that VRS providers hire RID certified interpreters.^{xvi} High levels of skill, experience and professionalism are necessary for the volume of work and the wide variety and unpredictable nature of call content. RID certification is a measure of qualifications of sign language interpreters. RID recommends that VRS providers develop hiring practices that ensure the highest quality interpreting services.

Other recommendations are as follows:

Ergonomics: VRS providers should assure that all steps are taken to provide a safe and healthy environment for interpreters, especially considering the physical and mental demands of VRS work.

Breaks: Frequent breaks during a shift should be encouraged to ensure quality of interpreting services. Research on spoken language interpreters has shown that an interpreter's performance declines after 15 minutes in video-based settings.^{xvii} Because the mental processes for spoken and signed language interpreting is parallel, this research has implications for interpreting in VRS settings.

Teaming opportunities: A team should be available for support when deemed necessary by the interpreter.

CDIs: Certified Deaf Interpreters/qualified Deaf interpreters should be available for needed teaming and/or assistance with idiosyncratic language.

Diversity: VRS providers should promote the hiring of a diverse body of interpreters to accommodate the variety of consumer cultures and preferences.

Training: Adequate training opportunities should be available for interpreters to keep abreast of best practices regarding interpreting through video, current trends in the industry and any technical issues for which they are responsible.

Technology: VRS providers must delineate what they are responsible for in regards to technology maintenance and what technical competencies interpreters are required to have. Interpreters are not technicians and need support in this area.

Call information: Whenever possible, the interpreter should be encouraged to receive any relevant information prior to the call in order to better assist them to interpret the content. Additionally, confidentiality is emphasized in the VRS setting as it is in all settings, in accordance with the first tenet of the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct.^{xix} Interpreters are required to hold in strict confidence any content seen or heard during calls.

Cultural Competency: VRS providers should make available information and training regarding the multicultural dimensions and language variations of consumers. Strategies for working across cultures will improve services provided by interpreters in the VRS setting.

Conclusion

VRS has revolutionized communication access for deaf people and has had a profound effect on the interpreting profession. RID will continue to work as a resource to consumer groups and the FCC as it represents the interests of the interpreters who serve as the heart of this remarkable service. For more information, please visit the RID website at www.rid.org or contact the RID national office.

REFERENCES:

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Federal Communications Commission. (2007). *Summary and Citations of TRS Items*. Retrieved March 13,2007, from http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/dro/trs_history_docket.html#2005
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- ^v Federal Communications Commission. In the Matter of Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, Order on Reconsideration,, FCC 05-139, CG Docket No. 03-123, released July 19, 2005.
- ^{vi} Federal Communications Commission. In the Matter of Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, Order, CG Docket No. 03-123, DA 06-2532, released December 15, 2006.
- ^{vii} Federal Communications Commission. In the Matter of Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, Report and Order, FCC 05-140, CG Docket No. 03-123, released July 19, 2005.
- ^{viii} Federal Communications Commission. In the Matter of Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, Report and Order, FCC 05-140, CG Docket No. 03-123, released July 19, 2005.
- ^{ix} Federal Communications Commission. *Reminder that Video Relay Service (VRS) Provides Access to the Telephone System Only and Cannot be Used as a Substitute for "In-person" Interpreting Services or Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)*, Public Notice, released September 7, 2005.
- ^x Video Relay Service Interpreting (VRS) is a free service for telephone communication regulated by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC).The deaf and hearing participants must be in separate locations. Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) is a fee-based interpreting situation where at least one person is at a distance. Often, the deaf participant and hearing participant are in the same room with the interpreter working remotely and connected through a high-speed Internet connection. VRI is an unregulated form of interpreting service. Definitions adopted from: *Close Encounters of the 2-D Kind*, Mary Henry Lightfoot, RID VIEWS, Vol. 22, Issue 6, June 2005.
- ^{xi} Federal Communications Commission. Report and Order and Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking released March 6, 2000, CC Docket 98-67, FCC No. 00-56, 15 FCC Rcd 5140 (2000), 65 FR 40093.
- ^{xii} Federal Communications Commission. In the Matter of Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, Order, CG Docket No.03-123, FCC 06-81, released June 16, 2006.
- ^{xiii} Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. *Team Interpreting Standard Practice Paper*, Retrieved March 13,2007, from <http://rid.org/>
- ^{xiv} Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. *Use of a Certified Deaf Interpreter Standard Practice Paper*, Retrieved March 20, 2007, from <http://rid.org/>
- ^{xv} Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. *About RID Overview*. Retrieved June2, 2007, from <http://rid.org/aboutRID/index.cfm>
- ^{xvi} Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. *Certification and Certificates*, Retrieved June 2, 2007 from http://rid.org/education/edu_certification/index.cfm. "RID certificates indicate that an interpreter was assessed and awarded certification by RID. This includes the NAD-RID National Interpreter Certification (NIC). However, RID also recognizes other certificates assessed and awarded certification by an organization outside of RID." i.e. NAD certification
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