

Jasmine Marin, BS, NIC Advanced Professional Sign Language Interpreting

Tips for Office Staff Working with Sign Language Interpreters

This document aims to provide some common helpful hints for offices that may be unfamiliar with working with a professional interpreter or that wish to improve their experience. Sharing this document with the whole office staff can help to ensure everyone has similar expectations of any interpreted appointments and can help everything go smoothly. Please take a moment or two to read this over and share it.

Interactions

- Speak directly to the client/patient; just like you would to anyone who spoke the same language as you.
- Make eye contact with the Deaf person. But don't expect that they'll make eye contact with you all the time. They have to look at the interpreter to understand what you are saying.
- When asking a question or closing a conversation, wait for the response through the interpreter. Sometimes head nods and other gestures get misinterpreted as agreement when in fact they may simply indicate understanding. There is a delay with interpreting so for clarity's sake, it's best to wait for the complete response through the interpreter before moving on or leaving the room.

Interpreter's Role

- The interpreter is an unbiased professional who is expected to accurately interpret everything said or signed during an interaction. The effectiveness of the interpretation depends greatly on mutual trust and respect. Expecting an interpreter not to interpret something that was said can degrade that trust between all parties.
- If you would like to direct any questions to the interpreter, it is best to do so before or after an appointment. During the appointment the interpreter is on task and is not able to effectively interpret everything if they are engaged as a participant in the conversation. Try to direct all questions to the client/patient. If necessary, you can ask the interpreter to pause for a moment and answer your question, but expect that before they do that they will interpret your request to the Deaf person to ensure that they know what is going on.
- The interpreter is there to help make your job easier by facilitating communication. If there is anything special they can do to achieve that, feel free to ask ahead of time or after the appointment.

Scheduling

- The interpreter is a service provider for your office. It is important for your office staff coordinate schedules with the interpreter and the Deaf person for any appointments. Share details with the interpreter about the reason for the appointment so they can prepare accordingly.
- Your office is responsible for all outside communications with your Deaf patient or client. Many Deaf people now have videophones and can be contacted directly through the video relay service which provides free interpreting for phone calls. It's always best to ask the person how they prefer your office contact them. While this is a small community, the interpreter often does not have any direct communication outside of your office with your clients/patients and does not know how to contact them.
- It's a good idea to always ask any Deaf clients/patients if they would like an interpreter, even if they don't ask. A new patient/client may assume your office doesn't have the service if the staff doesn't mention it.
- When you do schedule an interpreter for an appointment, make sure to document it on the patient's/client's appointment. Have a procedure in place to ensure office staff know to contact the interpreter if there are any changes to the schedule as soon as possible. This can help reduce costs

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to your office because appointments cancelled within the minimum timeframe will be billed in full, regardless of the reason for the untimely cancellation.

- Remind patients/clients of your office's cancellation policy. While federal laws prohibit special billing practices or discrimination of clients/patients with disabilities, it's a good idea to remind the Deaf person that you are providing an accommodation for them that incurs an additional business expense for your office and you would appreciate their respect of this. Ask them to help you keep costs down by letting you know well in advance if they need to cancel or change their appointment.
- Keep in mind that whatever your office's policies and procedures are in these matters, the interpreter will bill your office based on the written agreement between them and you. Your office, (not the Deaf person) is responsible for hiring, scheduling, and compensating the interpreter regardless of whether or not your office is able to recoup costs from billing patients.
- If you have questions about the interpreter's contract, ask. It's best to have a clear understanding ahead of time so everyone is on the same page and there are no surprises down the road if something unusual comes up. Your office may choose to share the terms of the interpreter's agreement with the whole staff for this reason as well.