

**Meeting the Growing Need
for American Sign Language Interpreters**

White Paper

***sorenson* communications™**

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Meeting the Growing Need for American Sign Language Interpreters

The demand for qualified American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters is rapidly growing and is impacting the deaf community. Current training programs are unable to keep up with the increased demand for highly-trained interpreters with a nationwide interpreter shortage as the result. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc (RID), the national professional association of sign language interpreters, has also recognized the insufficient numbers of interpreters available to meet the market's demand in recent submissions to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC)ⁱ declaring a "national interpreter crisis in the quantity, quality and qualifications of interpreters."ⁱⁱⁱ This white paper identifies how stakeholders can collaborate to marshal resources to increase and improve interpreter training programs to help meet the urgent demand to train larger numbers of new interpreters and upgrade the qualifications of existing interpreters.

The Need for Qualified ASL Interpreters is Growing

The current increased need for qualified ASL interpreters results primarily from:

Public Sector: The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires public institutions to provide "qualified readers or interpreters and other similar accommodations for individuals with disabilities"ⁱⁱⁱ including all deaf or hard-of-hearing patrons who request them. The major need is in public schools and higher education, but health care providers, hospitals, courts, public safety and other government offices are also seeing increased demand.

Private Sector: Video relay services such as Sorenson VRS, a service provided by Sorenson Communications, take advantage of new technologies to provide a ten-fold increase in the speed of communication over traditional text-based TTY and TDD methods. Interpreters are the heart of video relay services. This rapidly growing field is creating a vast new horizon of attractive opportunities for qualified interpreters. Many observers are concerned that market forces are drawing the best interpreters into the private sector; yet, the interpreter shortage is occurring in both sectors. However, VRS provides flexible work shifts for interpreters allowing them to work in both sectors. The shortage issue is compounded as additional needs and requests for interpreters arise.

Current Training Programs are not Keeping Pace with Demand

Programs for training and certifying interpreters have not yet caught up with this increased demand. Educational systems in most states have not yet recognized that ASL certification is now the gateway to an attractive career. Training programs in the United States are now producing less than 10 percent of the number of trained interpreters who could find jobs in the public and private sectors. According to a recent study conducted by the Utah Deaf Center, Salt Lake Community College has the only pre-service interpreter training program in Utah producing 13-18 new Associates Degree interpreters each year of which an estimated nine will go on to actually work as interpreters.^{iv}

As this backlog grows, it further constrains the ability of deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens to communicate. Governments, schools, universities, hospitals and others face the specter of ADA lawsuits because they are unable to meet the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons. The following chart outlines the current number of interpreters in Utah with their level of certification

and placement in the community. According to the Utah Deaf Center, there are currently only 74 qualified (master and intermediate) interpreters; more than 400 additional interpreters are needed (see chart below).^v

Chart One – Current Utah Interpreter Breakdown

	K-12	Higher Education	State	Private	Not Working as an Interpreter	Total
Master	1	1	1	10		13
Intermediate	3	13	2	43		61
Novice	62	31		11	4	108
Temporary Permits	39	7	0	0		46

A Positive Approach

The root cause of the ASL interpreter shortage is the lack of interpreter training programs. Such training programs require adequate funding that is either not available or recognized as an important need within the community. Although some universities with interpreter training programs are aware of the need for increased funding to improve the quality and availability of training^{vi}, many are simply unaware of the extent of the interpreter shortage in the community.

In recognizing this need, Sorenson VRS organized meetings with interested stakeholders and leaders of Utah’s deaf community including public and higher education, the state offices of rehabilitation and workforce services, elected officials and the private sector. This group focused on finding ways to increase funding for interpreter training education. The group also defined a DACUM (“develop a curriculum”) workshop in which the stakeholders identified three categories of potential trainees and outlined which educational institutions would develop a program to train each category. The group also determined the right approach to gain funding support from the state legislature.

Every state legislature and community is interested in the creation of high paying jobs. Job creation ultimately results in higher tax revenues which multiply with the consumption of goods and services within the community. A strong rationale was developed to sell funding of interpreter programs to the legislature based on the positive impact of increased high paying ASL interpreter jobs and their resulting economic impact. Working with a key legislative sponsor and government relations consultants funded by Sorenson VRS, these community leaders pinpointed a revenue-neutral financing source and drafted a bill using the rationale of positive economic impact and gained bi-partisan sponsorship. The bill, Utah House Bill 145^{vii} passed through the Utah legislature without a single negative vote. This legislative action was completed within three months from start to finish.

This bill passed in part from the recognized need in the deaf community and in part because of the positive economic impact that it would facilitate within the Utah economy. It was understood that interpreter training programs would ultimately lead to the creation of new stable jobs within the state. This new bill was not only designed to create educational opportunities, but also to spur the workforce development for high-paying, long-term interpreting jobs.

As a result of the Utah House Bill 145, \$4 million is now available for training ASL interpreters in Utah's colleges and universities. In addition, this funding is augmented by other state and federal funds for job retraining and rehabilitation programs and scholarship funds. Furthermore, the number of interpreters being trained in Utah's higher education system will increase from approximately 10 per year in 2004 to an estimated 24 per year in 2006, and 48 per year by 2008.

The Collaborative Process

Sorenson VRS is actively working with other states to set up similar programs across the nation. While the particular circumstances of each state will be unique, we have identified the following components of a positive community response to the interpreter shortage.

1. Engage All Stakeholders

The starting point is to engage all interested parties to pull together for the shared goal. This may include representatives from:

- Advocacy groups for the deaf and hard-of-hearing
- State rehabilitation administrators and deaf centers
- Public & higher education
- Workforce services & other job training resources
- Private sector (Sorenson VRS & other companies that employ interpreters)
- Legislators who will champion the issue

2. Identify Potential Career Trainees

At least three types of potential trainees may be identifiable, including:

- Individuals who have some interpreting capability but lack certification.
- New college freshman with no ASL experience but who are attracted to interpreting as a career.
- Secondary school students who see career potential in interpreting and get a head start through ASL classes in secondary schools.

3. Develop a Curriculum Spectrum

Starting with existing programs, determine which entity is best situated to train each identified type of interpreter training program. For example:

- A junior college with an existing certificate program may gear up to provide a six-month "immersion" program to accelerate the rate of training and shorten certification times.
- The public schools may adopt a curriculum for junior and senior high schools, allocating more of their current language programs to ASL and encouraging guidance counselors to inform students about the career opportunities ASL provides.
- A four-year college or university may upgrade an existing curriculum to provide more resources for students to receive associate and bachelor degrees in ASL. The four-year college or university program would work with surrounding junior colleges to develop a comprehensive career path.

4. Develop a Compelling Strategy to Win Support

Determine the best rationale and strategy to gain support within the local and political community. For example:

- Economic development is a high priority for most legislative bodies. Federal, state and city governments are more apt to allocate funding resources if they believe they are investing in areas that will provide high paying job creation that will generate positive economic impact.
- Interpreter training programs will reduce legal liability exposure for state institutions at risk for not meeting ADA requirements.
- The tremendous demand for qualified ASL interpreters has created new career opportunities for individuals interested in entering the field. Communications services such as VRS provide professional full-time jobs including benefits and management advancement opportunities.

5. Identify Funding Sources

A combination of many funding sources is more realistic than trying to pass a single, new appropriation to cover an entire statewide agenda. In some cases, pockets of funding may already exist that can be reallocated to address the interpreter crisis. Other cases may require the modification of program budgets to include a portion for ASL training. The key is to be creative and to involve experienced legislative champions to look for a combination of sources such as:

- State and federal job training funds, including short-term intensive training programs for displaced workers often administered by state workforce services departments.
- Tuition assistance from state rehabilitation funds.
- Realignment of current telephone surcharges used for TTY or TDD services, which are declining in demand, to be approved for use in training interpreters as a key component of today's telecommunications systems for the deaf and hard-of-hearing.
- Representation in public & higher education budgets containing programs for ASL in language, vocational training and concurrent enrollment.
- Grants from federal agencies and private foundations to help develop curriculum.
- Fund scholarships and stipends for students enrolled in certification programs from private-sector companies such as Sorenson VRS.

6. Advocate for Action

With a plan in place, the final step is for the stakeholders to push for any necessary legislative or administrative actions needed to obtain the funding and put the plan into action. This might include:

- Recruiting allies in the legislative and executive branches of state government, governing bodies of public and higher education and other public entities that may be affected.
- Retaining government relations consultants to shepherd the proposal through the process.
- Contacting news reporters and editorial boards to keep them abreast of the interpreter crisis and the proposed solutions.
- Arranging for deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens to testify at hearings.

- Most importantly, presenting a unified front for more impact with policy makers exhibiting broad support among stakeholders.

Conclusion

Sorenson VRS looks forward to sharing its success in working closely with all interested parties in finding ways to recruit, train and employ highly qualified ASL professionals. While the shortage of interpreters is a reality we have found a successful formula to help provide the funding and develop the curriculum to foster the development of additional ASL interpreters for the future. These new interpreters are vital to servicing the growing needs within the deaf community.

ⁱ Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., *Ex-Parte Presentation, Telecommunications Relay Services, Video Relay Services - Docket No 98-67*(April 2005), 1

ⁱⁱ Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., *Registry of Interpreters Reply to the National VRS Coalition Reply to Opposition of Sorenson Media, Inc., Docket No 98-67* (February 2005), 2

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate and House of Representatives, *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*, 101st Cong., 1990 (Washington, D.C. United States Government Printing Office 1990), Sec. 101 Definitions 42USC12111

^{iv} Mitch Jensen, *Crisis in Interpreter Field Hinders Communication of Deaf Adults and Children in a variety of Critical Situations* (Utah's Interpreter Initiative, 2004), 1-2

^v Mitch Jensen, *Crisis in Interpreter Field Hinders Communication of Deaf Adults and Children in a variety of Critical Situations* (Utah's Interpreter Initiative, 2004), 1

^{vi} Roberta J. Cordano J.D., University of Minnesota Disability Services, *Response to FC Docket No. 98-67 and CG Docket No. 03-123* (2004), 4

^{vii} Greg J. Curtis, Utah State Legislature, *Impaired Telecommunications Program, House Bill 145 (54-8b-10 amended by Chapters 174 and 375, 1997)*, General Session, 2005