

# Working with a Sign Language Interpreter in Therapeutic Settings

*Tina McFarland, RID CI and CT*

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## ***How to find an interpreter:***

- It is a good idea to keep contact information as your office develops relationships with interpreters. Your central office may also contract with interpreters or an agency to provide interpreting services.
- Make use of the expertise available to you at the state level. Michelle Niehaus may have information about interpreters she would (or would not) recommend. She will also have access to materials in American Sign Language (ASL) that can assist you in working with a deaf client. She can also help therapists develop some questions to ask during the session that will provide specific insight regarding the “deaf” piece of the interaction.
  - Michelle Niehaus, LCSW  
Mental Health Program Administrator for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services  
Division of Mental Health and Substance Abuse  
Cabinet for Health and Family Services  
Dept. for Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services  
office telephone: 502-564-4456  
e-mail: Michelle.Niehaus@ky.gov
- Two websites that may be helpful obtaining a list of interpreters:
  - Kentucky Board of Interpreters for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
    - Office 502-564-3296 ext. 237
    - <http://finance.ky.gov/ourcabinet/caboff/OAS/op/interpret/>
  - Kentucky Commission on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
    - <http://www.kcdhh.org>
- Interpreting agencies are sometimes a good place to obtain referrals, but it is important for you to do your homework.

## ***Before you call an interpreter:***

- What is your client’s situation? Female who has experienced sexual abuse by a male? A child who has experienced abuse by adults (was it male or female)? For example, if the perpetrator is known to be a male, you may want to try to ensure enlisting a female interpreter . . . You want to know what to ask for when you begin making calls to hire the interpreter.
- Begin to consider the use of a CDI (Certified Deaf Interpreter). Did the referral include any phrases such as “he’s never been to school,” “nobody understands her,” “only her sister can understand him,” or “he doesn’t use normal sign language.” There are some cases which require the teaming of two certified professionals. A qualified interpreter can often assist in helping you determine if this is necessary.
- Consider that an out-of-town interpreter may be the better choice (if indeed it is an option) for optimum therapeutic benefit. Many deaf people are used to seeing the same

few familiar faces of interpreters in their area . . . depending on the situation, it may be best for an interpreter not familiar with your client’s situation to provide interpreting services. Be aware, too, that it is a gross conflict of interest for family members (certified or not) to interpret professionally for deaf family members.

- Know that there is a difference between “signers” and “interpreters.” It is illegal in Kentucky to use a “signer” who is non-certified to interpret as a professional.
- Understand that the professional standard for interpreting encompasses a code of ethics and system of billing. The code of ethics can be found on the website of our nationally certifying organization, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, [www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org).
- Generally, interpreters in Kentucky charge the rate that the Office for Vocational Rehabilitation pays. You should be able to ask any agency or individual for their terms and conditions. Confidentiality is a cornerstone of certified interpreters – and since there are still not enough interpreters to meet all the needs in our state, some interpreters have knowledge about many deaf people. Be aware that the interpreter you call may need to ask some questions before accepting the assignment. If there is a conflict of interest, a quality interpreter can advise you of that. (For example, if an interpreter has interpreted your client’s appearance before the judge who is mandating counseling, it would be a conflict of interest for the same interpreter to also interpret the counseling . . . if an interpreter has interpreted the police investigation of alleged abuse/neglect, then it would not be appropriate for the same interpreter to appear in the counseling sessions which might follow. Sometimes, interpreters have personal relationships in the deaf community which would make it inappropriate to interpret therapy sessions.)
- Know that the demand for interpreters is great. Do not be surprised if the interpreter cannot match the schedule of the therapist. It may be necessary to adjust the calendars of the therapist, interpreter, and deaf client.
- Know that there is a difference between interpreters who hold a “temporary license” and those who are “fully licensed.” Generally, you will want a fully licensed interpreter for therapeutic situations, and preferably one with some experience. Working closely with a certified and fully licensed interpreter, there may be some situations in which a temporarily licensed interpreter may work.
- Know that the general cancellation policy for interpreters is 24-48 hours.

***Questions to ask when you do call for an interpreter:***

- What is your certification?
- Are you temporarily or fully licensed to interpret in Kentucky?
- Are you available to interpret therapeutic counseling sessions?
- How much experience do you have interpreting psychiatric/therapeutic situations?
- How much do you charge?
- Are you available to drive to our office?

***When the interpreter arrives:***

- It is the professional practice of nationally certified interpreters to arrive at least 15 minutes prior to an assignment. This allows a few minutes for the interpreter and therapist to clarify the setting and any information that will be helpful to make the process work smoothly.

***During the session:***

- Speak directly to the deaf client. It may be a bit awkward at first to not have the direct eye contact (as the deaf client will be looking at the interpreter sitting next to you).
- Do not involve the interpreter in the treatment plan. The interpreter is there to provide a professional service and cannot cross ethical boundaries to “help” beyond the interpreting of your session.
- Do not turn to the interpreter for discussion. It is better to speak with the interpreter before the session begins or after the session is concluded. It is very disconcerting for the interpreter to be in the mode of facilitating communication and then to be abruptly pulled from that mental process for personal comment. Deaf folks pick up on this and it can raise more questions for them (i.e. “why do they want to talk about me?” “why isn’t the therapist asking *me?*”)

***After the session:***

- Depending upon the severity of the content of the session, the client, etc. it may be wisest to allow the interpreter to exit with the client . . . and once the client is gone, the interpreter can return to the therapist to discuss any linguistic issues that need to be addressed.
- If, at any time, you as a therapist see that the interpreter has acted inappropriately or behaved unethically, you may take your concern to the Kentucky Board of Licensure for Interpreters. The current board members are listed on the website. The contact in Frankfort may also inform you of the process for filing a complaint with the board.  
Kentucky Board of Interpreters for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

- Office 502-564-3296 ext. 237
- <http://finance.ky.gov/ourcabinet/caboff/OAS/op/interpret/>

You may also file a complaint with our profession’s national certifying body, the national Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. Contact information may be found on that website at

- [www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org)

Importantly for your profession, it would be a good idea for you to share information about any inappropriate behavior with the Mental Health Coordinator for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services in Frankfort. This will inform and enable that office to assist other mental health services offices around the state.

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