

VRI – Video Remote Interpreting

Why you shouldn't rely on technology to replace live sign language Interpreters.

What is VRI (Video Remote Interpreting)? VRI is a sign language interpreting service that is accessed or utilized through a video camera, typically on a mobile device like a laptop or tablet. Similar to Skype, you would see a person 'on-screen' who is the interpreter who would facilitate the dialog between Hearing and Deaf consumers, while the interpreter is in some remote location (often in another State).

There is a huge push by businesses in utilizing this type of technology IN LIEU of a live interpreter... especially in the medical arena (Hospitals / Doctors offices) due to the perceived savings and convenience of having an interpreter on demand. Take time to reevaluate the 'cost savings and convenience' factors after considering the following points:

1. VRI is 2 dimensional, which reduces / removes the 'human' element which is often crucial in a physical language like American Sign Language.
2. High speed connection is required. If the connection to the internet is intermittent or regularly changes speeds (like throttling from an Internet Service Provider), the quality of picture degrades as does the communication.
3. The VRI station needs to be fully mobile, with high speed connection, with minimal data loss, in virtually every part of your facility. (There may be places technology cannot go like a MRI room for example).
4. Consider video screen limitations. Small screens may make it difficult to see the Interpreter, big screens may limit portability and versatility. Screens should also have the capacity to 'tilt' to be seen by the Deaf consumer (Example: Deaf patient in a hospital bed).
5. Virtually everyone on staff will need to know how to operate the equipment. Also some people will need to be in charge of 'quality checking' the equipment regularly to make sure it is functioning for when it is needed.
6. Consider how many VRI units you will need? What protocols will you have in place should you have more Deaf consumers than VRI units available?
7. Due to Staff turnover in your facility, regular trainings on how and when to utilize the VRI equipment will need to be scheduled ideally along with some Deaf cultural/sensitivity training.
8. The interpreter on screen has limitations:
 - a. They cannot see/ hear 360 degrees around the room and may miss things that should have been interpreted. Staff and Interpreter must be able to hear each other clearly for 'effective' communication under the ADA.
 - b. Most often, they will not be a local interpreter and may be unfamiliar with local signs used in this region and this can lead to miscommunications and/or delays. (Yes! ASL can vary from region to region).
 - c. Most importantly, the interpreter on screen may or may not be certified and/or qualified to interpret in the state of Pennsylvania for this particular scenario. These are just a few of the limitations the on screen interpreter may present. Ask the VRI Interpreter if they are PA State registered with ODHH.

Does this mean that VRI is bad?!? No... that is not the overall point being raised here. The main point is there are appropriate times and places for technology to be utilized. The over arching goal is that 'effective communication' is being met under the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Pennsylvania's Act 57. At this point in time, there are still many issues that CAN and WILL arise to render this type of communication access 'ineffective' from time to time. As a business one must also consider are you really saving all that much time and costs if you have to do all of the above (and more). VRI can be an excellent TOOL. Like any tool, use it on the appropriate thing... an example would be as a short term communication measure until a live interpreter arrives to your facility. It probably should not be considered dependable enough to 'replace' a live interpreter.