



GUIDELINES ON SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

SECURING AND UTILISING THE SERVICES OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

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Whenever planning international events, all efforts should be made to communicate with the delegates well in advance in order to arrange the most linguistically appropriate services. These guidelines may also be applied to events which are not organised by the United Nations (UN) and where the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) representatives or deaf people using sign language interpretation are participating.

LANGUAGES DEAF PEOPLE USE

Sign languages are the preferred languages of the majority of deaf people. Sign languages are languages in their own right and each country has its own national sign language, i.e., sign language is *not* universal. Many countries who share the same official spoken language still have different sign languages (e.g., each Spanish-speaking country has its own distinct sign language). Countries with more than one official language often have more than one sign language (e.g., Canada, Belgium, Switzerland). The Governments of many countries have either directly or indirectly recognised their national sign language, and training for interpreters may be available on the university level. However, in numerous countries, especially in the developing world, a corps of professional sign language interpreters does not yet exist.

International Sign is not a true language, in the sense that it does not always convey the richness of meaning that can be expressed in a full language, nor is it as efficient as a natural language. However, International Sign has evolved naturally over the past century to serve deaf people who have become more active in international cooperation. International Sign has certainly been used when there is no option of providing interpreting services in every national sign language represented at a meeting, and it has proven very effective when the participants from different countries meet in

conferences where the vocabulary has become fairly conventionalised (like the WFD Congresses, meetings of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Human Rights Council, and the Conference of States Parties to the CRPD).

Deaf people who attend UN meetings often have a working knowledge of written English or other UN official language, though it may be their third, fourth, or fifth language.

The choice of whether a national sign language or International Sign should be provided for a given meeting should be decided in consultation with the deaf participants; the organiser should not decide alone which sign language is to be made available. Deaf participants should always be asked for their language preferences: some may prefer a national sign language, some International Sign, and some a written form such as CART (Computer Assisted Real Time) captioning services on the screen as a supplement to interpreting. *The great advantage of real time captioning is that all the delegates in the meeting, for many of whom English is also their third, fourth, or fifth language, will benefit from the captioning, whether they are hearing or deaf (as is often true, accommodations for disabled people often benefit their non-disabled colleagues).*

SECURING INTERPRETERS

There is a general shortage of sign language interpreters worldwide, especially sign language interpreters who are qualified and have the expertise to work at high level conferences and meetings. Which means that qualified interpreters are likely to be fully booked well in advance. It is advised to use at least eight weeks' notice; however the earlier the better.

When booking an interpreter you should provide the following details:

- Date and time of the event including start and finish times.
- Full address of where the event is to take place including directions/map.
- Contact name, telephone number and/or e-mail address of the person making the booking as well as the contact person at the event.
- The nature of the event.
- The number of deaf and hearing participants, their role (are they for example presenting or chairing) and their language preferences.
- Information on if the interpretation is going to be recorded or webcast.
- Logistic arrangements on how and when the interpreter should be registered for the event.
- Any other information that could be helpful, e.g. if there are gender preferences, if a person also has a visual impairment, or any specific needs.
- Considerations for fees and other costs (interpreters should be paid for preparation, per diem, travel time and expenses such as accommodation), invoicing and payment procedures, and travel costs to and within the country where the meeting is being held. (In some countries, interpreters or agencies might expect a “retainer”, an advanced deposit to reserve the service of an interpreter, which will be deducted from the total of the final invoice.)

In booking national sign language interpreters, if that is the preference of the deaf participant, the UN approved agency/vendor for spoken language interpreters may or may not have sign language interpreters in their interpreter data bank. If they do not, the national deaf association, national sign language interpreter association, the national registry of sign language interpreters (if available in

that specific country) or World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) may be contacted for interpreters who may be experienced in international conferences. Even if the approved vendor does have sign language interpreters, care must be taken that they be familiar with the jargon and environment of the UN.

In booking IS interpreters, if that is the preference of the deaf participant, it should be noted that few of the vendors will understand the qualifications necessary for an International Sign interpreter. It is highly recommended to use WFD-WASLI accredited International Sign interpreters. The list is available at [the WFD website](#).

The [WASLI website](#) contains a list of countries and their associations of sign language interpreters. You can also contact the WASLI regional representative on the “About us” section of the website and they can refer you to appropriate services in the country in which the event is being held, if services are available, or the country nearest if there are no qualified interpreters available in the host country. It should be clear beforehand if the Section ordering interpreting services can engage them as independent contractors or if they can only be paid through an approved vendor. Most International Sign interpreters at this level work as independent contractors.

As the UN is signatory to at least one of the AIIC agreements, the institution must comply and contract the interpreters according to the AIIC agreement terms and conditions.

The quality of the interpreting service can be improved by providing the interpreters with adequate preparation. The interpreter should be provided with the following:

- Copies of any relevant paperwork – including minutes, agendas and speeches (power-point presentations/illustrations, etc).
- Prior to any deaf participant’s presentation, an appropriate amount of time for the deaf presenter to meet with the sign language interpreters to prepare.
- In larger and demanding events, adequate time for the deaf presenter/deaf chair to meet with the person responsible for interpreting arrangements, technical staff and interpreters to go through the process, such as seating arrangements, lighting, screens, cameras and general visibility.
- If there are to be any presentations or other media forwarding the slides or CD/DVD in advance or allow time for the interpreters to watch them before they are presented to the audience. *It is strongly recommended that CD/DVDs to be subtitled in English to ensure that it is accessible to a wider audience, which includes deaf people who do not use a signed language and hearing delegates for whom English is a third or fourth language.*
- The name of the person in charge of the event on arrival.
- Contact details of co-workers (interpreters), if any.
- Any other information that is relevant to the event.

INTERPRETER QUALIFICATIONS

For national sign language interpreters, the interpreter should have certification/accreditation from the country of the sign language, if available. Some countries have not yet instituted certification procedures. In any case, it is preferable that the deaf participant should be consulted as to which interpreters would be qualified for the assignment.

For International Sign interpreters, the interpreter must be WFD-WASLI accredited. In regional UN events, such as UN ESCAP, sign language interpreters from the region should be considered where there are interpreters with international experience. Again, the deaf participant, WFD, and WASLI will be of invaluable assistance in finding the appropriate interpreters.

INTERPRETER TEAMS

As with spoken language interpreters, national sign language and International Sign interpreters work in teams so as to ensure a quality interpretation and to avoid mental or physical fatigue.

A unique feature of International Sign teams is that a team might consist of more than two interpreters. Interpreters who are themselves deaf are often more adept at International Sign than interpreters who can hear, so deaf interpreters are integrated into the team. Working with a hearing partner as a feeder who relays the information from spoken language into their national sign language, the deaf interpreter works from the national sign language into International Sign for the audience. Working in teams of deaf-hearing interpreters provides a level of service not possible with a hearing interpreter alone.

INTERPRETER FEES

Interpreter fees depend on a number of factors, including:

- The nature of the assignment.
- The times and duration of the assignment.
- The qualifications and experience of the interpreter.
- And, in some cases, the number of deaf participants (if there are deaf panellists or chairs of sessions, they may need a separate team in a different location from the deaf delegates or observers).

For UN events [the AIIC-United Nations Agreement](#) must be complied.

TYPICAL WORK PRACTICES

For any event a minimum of two interpreters should be booked. Depending on the duration, complexity and participants of the event, the team strength should be expanded. Like spoken language interpreters, sign language interpreters typically work in teams, each interpreter working for 15-20 minute periods of time in order to maximise the accuracy and the effectiveness of the interpretation.

Interpreters need regular breaks during the event. For full day conferences, the interpreting team should include interpreters who can work during the conference breaks so that deaf delegates and participants may network and conduct short meetings outside of the conference proceedings. This will sometimes mean teams of 3 or 4 interpreters working a single conference in a day to cover not only the formal conference, but also networking during breaks and covering side events before and after the agenda of the conference.

Previously prepared or Computer Assisted Real Time (CART), if provided for hard-of-hearing audiences, should also be visible to the sign language interpreters as a support. Despite the possibilities provided by technology, WASLI and WFD caution against sign language interpreting that relies exclusively on captioning. When information is conveyed from a spoken format to captioning, a reduction of information may occur which would have a significant impact on the quality of sign language interpretation. It is essential to consider how deaf participants would be able to be fully involved if there is no one present to interpret their signed utterances into a spoken

language. In any case, a hearing member of the deaf/hearing interpreting team must be available to interpret from sign language into spoken English or other UN official language for comments or questions from deaf participants in the audience.

All the material received will be treated with confidentiality and will be returned to the conference organisers at the end of the events. Should the event be recorded (audio and/or video) please inform the interpreters beforehand in order to discuss relevant acknowledgements and copyright of their work product.

Ethical practices of interpreters. WASLI and WFD are international organisations with national members. The national members monitor the profession and support the ethical practice of interpreters. National associations of sign language interpreters have codes of ethics and dispute resolution processes. In addition to this, national deaf organisations and/or interpreter service providers may have policies that guide interpreting services. Problems between interpreters and event organisers are best resolved through direct communication at the event. Should there be a need to lodge a formal complaint about the service, contact the agency or organisation through which the interpreter was booked when applicable. In case of WFD and WASLI accredited IS interpreters, complaints should be addressed to the WFD and WASLI.

WASLI and WFD recommend that interpreters booked for conferences be members of the national association of their country, if one exists. If no national interpreting association exists in the country, seek recommendations from the national deaf organisation(s).

LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are a number of things that will enable the sign language interpreter to provide effective service:

- The environment needs to be conducive to effective communication. This means sufficient lighting and sound systems (i.e. provision of wireless microphones and portable headsets if necessary), as well as an appropriate background against which the interpreter will work that is free of visual distractions. If the interpreter will be onscreen, it would be useful to inform the interpreter in advance of the colour of the background, so that interpreters may wear appropriately coloured contrasting clothing for enhanced visibility. It would be helpful to also have risers for interpreters to stand on to be visible, especially if it is one level seating and/or there is no projection on big screen.
- Effective communication requires that deaf people and interpreters are able to see each other. In smaller meetings sign language interpreters should be placed in the meeting room and easily seen by deaf people. When sign language interpreters are working remotely in the same building, from a booth or TV studio, the projection in the hall should be large enough for the deaf participants to clearly see the interpreter. When deaf participants are actively participating in the proceedings (presenting, asking a question, or commenting), the organisers should either have additional interpreters in the hall, or the remote interpreters must be able to see them and interpret into a spoken language from the remote location. Considering possible failures with technology or other circumstances, it is vital to ensure that interpreters are in the same building to be able to interpret in the meeting room if necessary.
- If the proceedings are projected on a screen, the interpreter should be included somewhere on the screen large enough to be seen by the entire room. On the screen, the speaker, the sign language interpreter, and the Computer Assisted Real Time (CART) captions should all be visible. Especially at the UN, where protocol often determines where Chairs, Panellists, Delegates, and observers may sit, a screen with all three images will be necessary for any Deaf participant to follow the proceedings. Power-point or DVD presentations should also allow for the interpreter and captions to

appear on the screen simultaneously. (This may necessitate a review of the audio-visual procedures and software available in large conference rooms, as well as ensuring that the microphones of each delegate be flexible enough to be available to the sign language interpreter (interpreting from sign language to English) for the delegate signing at his or her seat. Hand held microphones are particularly useful for this purpose.)

- Deaf delegates should be consulted about whether they prefer to stand in front of their audience, as deaf signers are accustomed to visual contact with their interlocutors in their culture. This could have ramifications for the cameras tracking speakers for the screen. As with spoken language interpreters, there will be a short lag time when a sign language interpreter is working between a sign language and a spoken language. Allowing time for this process is important during questions and answer session or during discussions to ensure that all participants are included.

THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE SL INTERPRETERS

Although there are many rules at national level that regulate the service provision of sign language interpreters, ultimately it is the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in [Article 9 paragraph 2\(e\)](#), that mandates this service: Provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and facilities open to the public. In addition, [Article 21 \(b\)](#): Freedom of expression and opinion states: Accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages, braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes, and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions.

As the organisation behind the CRPD, the Secretariat and Agencies of the UN are in a position to lead the way in modelling proper provision of interpreting services at all levels of the UN system.

Interpreter Check list

When the UN or its special Agencies send an invitation to the WFD or another deaf organisation or when deaf participants attend an event the organiser should pay attention to the following sign language interpreting arrangements:

1. Event organiser will book sign language interpreters after having consulted with the deaf participant(s) (if necessary also with WFD or WASLI) about the participant's language choice and whether s/he has a preference for a particular sign language interpreter.
2. Fees and other expenses, salary, accommodation and travel arrangements shall be agreed between the sign language interpreters and the organiser prior to the event.
3. All meeting materials and practical information that are sent to the participants need also to be delivered to the sign language interpreter(s).
4. If the event is meant for a large audience the seating arrangements for sign language interpreters have to be checked prior to the event: they should be seated opposite to the deaf participant so that the deaf person has accessible visual contact to the sign language interpreters, the presenters and the screen. The sign language interpreters need to have chairs without armrests. Sign language interpreters have to be able to use a microphone and they will be provided with over the head headphones as opposed to the 'in the ear' variety.
5. Sign language interpreters should be given the opportunity to have their notes and meeting papers on display while they interpret. All materials distributed to the participants in the meeting will be circulated also to the sign language interpreters. Provision of water or other refreshments should be guaranteed during the meeting.

6. In small scale events and workshops the deaf participant and the sign language interpreters should be able to be seated opposite to each other.

7. In a case where a deaf person chairs or presents at an event all practical arrangements should be coordinated well in advance between the organiser, deaf person and sign language interpreters.

About the World Federation of the Deaf *The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 134 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). (www.wfdeaf.org) Email: info@wfd.fi*

About the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters

WASLI's goal is to promote and support the development of interpreters around the world. For example, some countries do not yet have interpreter associations or interpreter training, so WASLI works to encourage those countries to create national interpreter associations. WASLI also work to promote strong working ties between national interpreter associations and national Deaf associations, in the same way that WASLI and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) work together. (<http://wasli.org/>)



AIIC Guidelines

for positioning of sign language interpreters in conferences, including web-streaming

Proper spatial organization enhances communication when SLI is used in meetings. These simple steps will help you realize your goals.

Sign Language Network.

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I. IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM

Set up

Sign language interpreters work in teams of two or three per language pair. The active interpreter in each team stands next to the panel or speaker / chairperson. If there are two signed languages, the interpreters should if possible not stand next to each other, but on either side of the stage facing the audience. The supporting interpreter(s) sits facing the active interpreter.



Figure 1 shows the positioning of two teams as well as the sign language users. For each team the items listed below should be followed.

Space

There must be sufficient space for the teams to work together and they must be able to see each other. The active interpreter needs a space of approximately 1.5 x 1.5 metres minimum (2.0 x 2.0 maximum). The supporting interpreter is seated approx. 1 – 3 metres in front of the active interpreter.



Figure 1: placement of sign language interpreter teams, cameras, monitors, screen and audience.

Note: IS = International Sign

Visibility

Sign language interpreters must be able to see any sign language users in the room and the users must be able to see them:

- Distance between interpreters and sign language should be no more than approx. 10 metres.
- No visual distractions in sightline.
- **Background screen** (see also Web streaming on the following pages) **Explanation:** *it is important that the area behind the sign language interpreter is not visually distracting. For example, no highly patterned backgrounds or poor backlighting, no windows or bright screens; people should not be able to walk in front of or behind the interpreter. The background should be a solid colour.*
Platform/stage: each active interpreter must be placed on a raised platform. **Explanation:** *interpreters should be higher than the general audience so everyone can see them.*

Lighting

- **Sufficient and indirect lighting** on the active sign language interpreter, especially on the hands and face, casting no shadows on the face.
- **NB:** *for new systems we recommend installation of adjustable lights. They should ideally be cool beam to ensure the interpreter is working in a pleasant temperature.*

Monitor(s)

- **Visual monitor** should be placed where the interpreter can see it/them. The visual monitor mirrors the display of the large screen in the room, including real time captioning (also referred to as speech to text or CART). A second and third monitor is needed when interpreters are working directly from real time captioning and/or from sign language to sign language. Full setup consists of Monitor 1: Slides; Monitor 2: Real time captioning; Monitor 3: Live video feed of source sign language.
Explanation: *the interpreter will not need to turn around to see the text on the screen.*

Audio

- **Wireless headsets** for all interpreters in the team and one spare. **Explanation:** *this avoids trailing cables and ensures that the interpreters' equipment is for their use only. The headset receivers should easily attach to clothing and use for example Radio Frequency (FM) and not infra-red transmission (the latter can lead to signal distortion when signing).* **NB:** *Ensure sufficient replacement batteries are provided.*
- **Handheld microphone:** The sign language interpreter works more easily with a handheld wireless microphone (not an attached table-top microphone, lapel microphone or headset combo), as they can turn easily towards deaf signers in the audience as well as signers giving presentations at the front of the conference room. **Explanation:** *the interpreter provides interpretation from sign language to spoken language if a signer is presenting or intervening.*

Chairs & table

- **Chairs** for working and supporting interpreters: For each interpreter on the team a chair should be placed facing the position of the active interpreter. The chairs are preferably non-revolving

and have either a low armrest or none at all. They should also be ergonomically adjustable to suit the working interpreters.

- **Table** for documents and water: The table should be situated next to the chairs for the interpreters to place documents, notes and water.

Documents & water

- **Documents** for working and supporting interpreters: Paper copy of all the session documents (the same documents as provided to the spoken language interpreters).
- **Water** for interpreters: Water bottles should be provided to the team of sign language interpreters working in the meeting room.

II. WEB STREAMING

Sign language interpretation is often live streamed via the Internet. For clear and quality web streaming, the following guidelines are suggested.

Background

Chroma key (preferred): called also a ‘green or blue screen’ the technician overlays the web-streamed picture of the event with the sign language interpretation. **Explanation:** *signers prefer this integrated form as they do not need to look at two pictures at once.* **NB:** *if two sign language interpreters are working next to each other the screen needs to be approximately 2.5 metres wide (the preferred solution is to place the two interpreters separately on either side of the screen).*



Picture in Picture: interpreter displayed in an inserted frame on screen: **Explanation:** *if chroma key is not used or available then the next best option is a grey-blue screen as a background.* **NB:** *the interpreter frame should be placed on the right hand side (viewer’s perspective).*



Important: if given a choice, viewers prefer Chroma key to a box or frame.

If Chroma key is not available:

Audio-visual streaming

- **Split screen:** preferably in 3 or 4 splits: speaker, sign language interpreter and speech to text with slide presentations.

Example: <https://webcast.ec.europa.eu/european-day-of-persons-with-disabilities-07-12>



Technical support

- **Dedicated technician for the web camera:** the height and the focus of the camera need to be controlled by a dedicated technician. **Explanation:** *not all interpreters are the same height so when they change over the zoom and height need to be adjusted. NB: the interpreter must be on camera from the waist to slightly above the head.*

III. INTERVENTIONS BY SIGNERS

Live

A signer may intervene during the session as a presenter or with a comment or question. The sign language interpreters in the conference room will then provide interpretation into spoken language or both when needed.

- Video / Camera: The camera should be on the signer (NOT on the interpreter working into spoken language).
- Image broadcast: When the signer's intervention begins, the image of the interpreter must be removed from the screen. The only image broadcast is of the signer, unless the signer is also being interpreted into another sign language.
- Audio: a wireless microphone with good audio quality must be provided so spoken language interpreters in the booths receive clear audio input from the sign language interpreter.

Video link

At some sessions a signer may intervene remotely via a video link. The sign language interpreters in the conference room will then provide interpretation into spoken language or another sign language or both when needed.

- Video and screen: very clear screen image for the signer and the sign language interpreter to be visible in both directions (the signer must be able to see the interpreter and the interpreter the signer).
- Audio: a wireless microphone with good audio quality must be provided so spoken language interpreters in the booths receive clear audio input from the sign language interpreter.

Recommended citation format:

Sign Language Network. "Guidelines for positioning of sign language interpreters in conferences, including web-streaming". *aiic.net*. December 21, 2016. Accessed June 20, 2019.

<<https://aiic.net/p/7821>>.

Annex G to UNCEB-AIIC Agreement on Sign Language

Guidance provided by Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence (AIIC) for sign language interpretation

Working conditions

Team strength

1. Team strength is defined as follows:

- (a) At no time should fewer than two interpreters be assigned;
- (b) No interpreter should be assigned as the only member of a team capable of providing relay from a given working language;
- (c) In the case of two-language meetings, at least three interpreters capable of working into both languages should be assigned;
- (d) In the case specifically referred to in paragraph 2 below, at least three interpreters should be assigned, of whom at least two must be capable of working into two of the languages used;
- (e) More interpreters should be assigned when:
 - (i) The language combinations are such that few interpreters would not be sufficient to cover them;
 - (ii) Numerous written presentations are to be given;
 - (iii) The technical or scientific nature of the conference calls for extensive in-session preparation.
- (f) Teams including one or more Group II interpreters should comprise sufficient experienced interpreters so that Group II interpreters shall not be required to provide relay, whenever possible.

Workload

2. The Organizations should recruit interpreters according to the sign language required. For all meetings in which the sign language interpreter team is also to work into a spoken language, in no case should the team consist of less than three interpreters.

Technical installations

3. Organizations should endeavour to provide facilities for meetings, at headquarters or elsewhere, compliant with the international standards applicable to simultaneous interpretation facilities, such as relevant latest applicable ISO.

4. Technical specifications for the positioning of sign language interpreters in conferences, including web-streaming, are available on the AIIC website:

<https://aiic.net/page/7821/guidelines-positioning-of-sign-language-interpreters-inconferences/lang/1>