

ASL Interpreters and Equitable Accessibility

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Think Outside The VOX

Introduction:

Theater interpreting presents unique challenges that are not always addressed in traditional interpreter education and training programs. This document explores key gaps in the field, including insufficient specialized training, a lack of diversity among interpreters, and limited career pathways beyond on-stage interpreting. It also proposes solutions such as specialized education, mentorship programs, and industry-wide collaboration to foster a more inclusive and well-equipped interpreting workforce in the theater industry.

Indicators of Inequity in Interpreter service delivery:

- **Insufficient Training:** Existing Interpreter Training and Education programs may not adequately prepare interpreters for the unique demands of theater settings, including specialized vocabulary, fast-paced dialogue, and the need to convey nuanced stage directions and theatrical elements. Professional Communities of Practice, regional chapters of Interpreters, and some arts organizations have taken the task upon themselves to secure funding to mitigate the gap in training for their sector.
- **Focus on "Spotlight" Roles:** Many aspiring interpreters prioritize acceptance of high-profile assignments, such as working with celebrities, rather than seeking roles that offer broader professional development and contribute to the overall accessibility for and with theatre artists that are Deaf or disabled.. This tends to happen when Deaf artists, Deaf Interpreters or DASLs (Directors of Artistic Sign Language) are not appropriately secured to advise venues or programs on equitable inclusion practices .This creates a perceived deficit in the pool of available and qualified interpreters to provide services for production or arts administrative tasks.
- **Lack of Diversity:** The industry needs a more diverse pool of interpreters that reflect the demographics of the areas where interpreters are secured. This is to include Deaf Interpreter communities and those with backgrounds in theater arts, to ensure equitable representation and better serve the needs of diverse audiences.

- **Limited Career Paths:** The current system may not provide sufficient opportunities for interpreters to explore roles beyond interpreting on stage, such as working in theater administration, production, or education.

Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach:

- **Reform Interpreter Education:**
 - **Specialized Training:** Develop curriculum specifically for theater interpreting, covering topics like literary translation, stagecraft, theatrical terminology, and interpreting for live performance. Theatre Arts venues can be an asset if they innovate to include Theatre Arts Education programming to include the practitioners that provide services to the venue.
 - **Emphasis on Diverse Career Paths:** Theatre arts venues can orient and educate students of their programs about the various career options available within the theater industry, Access service provision services, like ASL Interpreting can and should be discussed with students.
- **Industry-Wide Collaboration:**
 - **Mentorship Programs:** Establish mentorship programs to connect aspiring interpreters with experienced professionals in the theater industry.
 - **Job Shadowing Opportunities:** Provide opportunities for students to observe and learn from experienced Deaf artists, Deaf Interpreters, and other theater interpreters in different roles.
 - **Create Entry-Level Positions:** Develop entry-level positions within theater organizations to provide valuable experience and career pathways for aspiring interpreters such as being an understudy or the equivalent of a production stage manager to the ASL interpreter team that has been hired for a show.
- **Shifting Cultural Norms:**
 - **Promote a Culture of Inclusion:** Encourage a shift in industry culture that values the contributions of ASL interpreter teams beyond their role as accessibility providers.
 - **Recognize the Value of Diverse Roles:** Highlight the importance of interpreters working behind the scenes and in proximity to administrative roles such as marketing, audience development and education to ensure the overall accessibility of theater productions.

By implementing these changes, the theater industry can cultivate a more robust and diverse pool of qualified ASL interpreter teams, leading to a more inclusive and accessible experience for all.