

What differentiates American Sign Language (ASL) Agencies from Spoken Language Agencies?

Agencies providing ASL interpreting services have recently expanded beyond traditional ASL agencies. For example, what was previously provided within local communities has now proliferated among spoken language agencies, temp agencies, and online marketplaces. This has impacted consumers and the sign language interpreting profession. We see a great need and opportunity for the local community to increase awareness and engage in a dialogue that will educate everyone involved in this large community of providers and consumers of sign language interpreting services about the importance of maintaining high quality sign language interpreting services. Unlike spoken language interpreting services, the provision of ASL services is mandated by laws such as the ADA which have grown out of years of community action for the rights to communication access on the part of the Deaf community. Because consumers may be unaware of the nuances that go into providing sign language interpreting services, the following talking points are intended to guide discussions toward this purpose.

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ASL agencies are run by interpreters

Often, the owners of ASL agencies are interpreters themselves. This puts them in a unique position because they have a first-hand understanding of ASL, the interpreting process, and the certification system. The RID certification system assesses a minimum standard in qualification, so one cannot rely on certification alone to guarantee a level of quality. Being familiar with the language allows the agencies to assess beyond certification.

ASL agencies are run by Deaf individuals

Some ASL agencies are run by Deaf individuals who are in the unique position of sharing the experience with the very consumers they serve. They have a clear understanding of the consumers of ASL interpreting services and, as consumers of interpreters themselves, are able to assess quality of service and client needs. ASL agencies can provide a level of quality control over interpreters who misjudge their suitability for certain jobs, or accept assignments without adequate pre-assignment information.

ASL agencies understand ASL Interpreters

Owners of ASL agencies understand the language and culture of the Deaf community, the demands an assignment can present and are thereby better able to match the most appropriate interpreter to the assignment. Those owners who are not interpreters are at least fluent in ASL. This familiarity with the language is invaluable in assessment of the situation and placement of the most appropriate interpreter. A coordinator unfamiliar with the language has no tools to accurately assess the skills of an interpreter they are assigning. This can lead to a mismatch

between the client's needs and the service provided which can lead to delays and unsatisfactory service, costing both time and money. Additionally, the placement of an unqualified interpreter can have liability implications.

ASL agencies are members of the Deaf community

The owners of ASL agencies by virtue of their positions are often members of the Deaf and ASL interpreting communities. This means they are aware of the language and culture, and, as members of the community, know the interpreters and clients. Knowing interpreters again helps in placing the most appropriate interpreter for the assignment both in terms of skills, ethics and professionalism. Knowing the Deaf community helps coordinators respond to specific needs and communicate directly with clients in their native language.

ASL agencies are local

Many ASL agencies are situated in the community and neighborhood(s) they serve. This is advantageous in many ways. Unlike an agency that is not based in the community, local agencies know the layout of the places they serve and needs of consumers they serve. They know the local resources and strive to send an interpreter from the right geographical location. Often, Spoken Language Agencies and out of state ASL agencies are not aware of the physical location of a place in a way that assists them in recruiting the most appropriate interpreter. This can cost time and money in delays, additional mileage and increased travel time.

ASL agencies specialize in one language

Owners of ASL agencies are able to understand the nuances of the Deaf Community and language needs. By specializing in one language, they become experts.