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Enhancing Interpreting Service Delivery Within The State/Federal Rehabilitation System

By: Glenn B. Anderson

Abstract

State VR agencies have long been among the major procurers of interpreting services for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Nevertheless, concerns and issues such as the provision of quality interpreting services, chronic personnel shortages, and costs for services continue to persist in the field. To address these issues, this article reports on a national research study which sought input from a broad cross-section of state VR administrators and service providers. Four main categories of findings are reported. The four categories include: a) most frequently used methods of coordinating interpreter services, b) number of certified interpreters used by VR agencies, c) estimates of need for interpreters with national and/or state certification to meet agency and consumer needs, and d) ranking of state needs and priorities. The article concludes with a list of recommendations for future directions.

Introduction

State VR agencies have long been among the major procurers of interpreting services for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The passage of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1965 opened up an important new means for these agencies to improve services to these consumer groups by authorizing, for the first time, the use of case service funds to purchase interpreting services. Since that time, the state/federal rehabilitation program

has contributed immensely to the expanded role of interpreters in the service delivery process and to increased financial support for interpreter education and preparation.

In spite of the extensive investments of state VR agencies in interpreter service delivery, concerns and issues related to the provision of quality services, chronic personnel shortages, and costs for services continue to persist. Because the number of trained and qualified interpreters continues to be in chronically short supply, the demand for interpreters has become even more intense and competitive with the enactment of federal legislation such as the ADA (1990) and IDEA (1992).

Furthermore, the current political and economic climate is one in which "cost cutting" and "re-engineering" have become more prevalent among service programs throughout the U.S. Thus, the desire to minimize costs for services and at the same time allocate adequate funds to provide the best quality services possible has become a critical issue confronting major procurers of interpreting services such as VR agencies. The implications of these developments present a number of additional issues such as how can state VR agencies best keep pace and effectively compete in the market for quality interpreting services? How can state VR agencies ensure that the deaf and hard of hearing consumers they serve will have adequate access to the most

skilled and qualified interpreters when needed?

To address these issues, this article reports on a national research study which sought input from a broad cross-section of VR administrators and service providers. The goal was to assist state VR agencies and federal funding programs to identify major priorities to further enhance interpreter service delivery.

Method and Data Collection

A 42-item questionnaire was mailed to the state directors of 50 VR agencies within the continental United States during the 1990-91 fiscal year. State VR agencies outside of the mainland (i.e., Hawaii and U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico and Guam) were not included in the study. The state directors were asked either to complete the questionnaire themselves or designate responsibility to appropriate professional staff within the agency. The questionnaire sought information on variables such as agency methods of coordinating interpreting services, amount of VR funds expended on interpreting services, and agency needs and priorities relative to further enhancing the provision of quality interpreting services.

Two mailings plus telephone follow-up contacts yielded a total of 47 out of 50 completed questionnaires from the state agencies. The overall response rate was 94%. It should be noted that a number of states indicated that, for

various reasons, the information requested by the survey was not easily accessible. As a result, a considerable amount of additional time was needed to complete the data collection phase of this study.

In the sections that follow, four main categories of findings are reported and briefly discussed. The four categories include: a) most frequently used methods of coordinating interpreter services, b) number of certified interpreters used by VR agencies, c) estimates of need for additional interpreters with national and/or state certification to meet agency and consumer needs, and d) ranking of a list of state needs and priorities. The article is concluded with a list of recommendations for future directions.

Results

Methods of coordinating interpreter services. The states were asked which methods were used to provide and coordinate interpreting services for their consumers. If more than one method was used, they were asked which method was used most frequently. The most frequently used method reported was direct subcontracts with interpreters by counselors. Twenty-three of the 47 states (48.9%) reported that their counselors directly subcontract with interpreters. A second method, used by eight of the responding states (17.0%), was that of having counselors directly subcontract with a local interpreter referral service agency. Fees were then paid by the counselor directly to the interpreter referral agency. The methods of billing used included paying a flat rate fee per hour or a flat rate fee per assignment.

Two main reasons were identified to explain why counselor directed subcontracts with interpreters is the most frequently

used method of service provision. They are:

a. Cost factors. Costs are higher if an interpreter referral service is used (i.e., counselor or agency must pay administrative or service coordination fees in addition to hourly interpreter fees). Due to limited case service monies, many counselors desire to serve as many consumers as their budgets reasonably permit. Thus, direct subcontracts appeared to be the most cost-effective way to serve large numbers of consumers.

b. Quality assurance factors. Due to the myriad of services often needed by their consumers, many counselors have frequent and ongoing contacts with them. Thus, in many situations, counselors may be more familiar with the communication needs of their consumers than other service providers who have had little if any prior involvement with them. Consequently, when interpreter services must be provided, direct subcontracts can be a means to ensure greater probability that their consumers will have access to interpreters who can best meet their communication needs.

The respondents were then asked how well the most frequently used method, that of subcontracting directly with interpreters, met the needs of the agency in serving its consumers. A four-point scale was used, ranging from "poor" to "very good." Very few states rated the method of subcontracting directly with interpreters as "very good." Close to one-half (42.5%) of the respondents rated the method as "fair" and about one-third (32.5%) rated the method as "good." Based on comments from the respondents, the following two broad areas of concern impacted their ratings: a) the persistent shortage of qualified and skilled interpreters to meet consumer needs and b) the time and

effort often associated with locating a qualified interpreter for each consumer when needed.

Number of Certified Interpreters Used by VR Agencies. The respondents were asked to report the number of interpreters with national certification (i.e., RID) and/or state credentials (i.e., State Quality Assurance Screening Level or QAST) who were contracted for interpreting services by their agencies during the most recently completed fiscal year. The most recently completed fiscal year at the time this study's data collection phase commenced was 1989-90.

To enhance reader ease in reviewing and interpreting the major findings reported in the sections that follow, the data are organized and reported by RSA geographical regions rather than by individual states.

Table 1 provides data on the number of interpreters with national and/or state credentials used by state VR agencies within each RSA geographical region at the time the survey was conducted. With regard to national certification, the regions which reported using the largest number of national certified interpreters were Regions IV (Southeast) and V (North Central). The regions which reported using the fewest number of nationally certified interpreters were Regions II (Northeast) and VII (Middle West).

It is possible that the actual number of nationally certified interpreters is underrepresented in Table 1. One reason is that some states had expressed difficulty accessing data on the number of certified interpreters used by their state agency. Another is that when VR consumers are referred to other vendors for services, those agencies or programs, rather than VR, are accommodating the VR consumer's communication needs by providing

interpreting services at no cost to VR.

For interpreters with state credentials, the regions which reported using the largest number of interpreters with a QAST screening level or other type of state credential, were Regions V (North Central), I (Northeast), VIII (Rocky Mountains), and IX (Pacific Coast). It is apparent in Table 1 that each of these regions reported using more interpreters with a QAST screening level or other type of state credential than those with national certification.

These findings, regarding the use of interpreters with state level credentials, appear to reflect program and policy initiatives within selected

individual states. Some states, for example, have legislative mandates to evaluate and certify interpreters. Other states, through designated state agencies, have begun to place more emphasis on "local control" of interpreter screening and evaluation programs to meet more readily local community needs. The reader is cautioned, however, that these findings should not be interpreted as minimizing the value or importance of the national certification evaluation programs. In addition, these findings are not intended to imply efforts at the state level to circumvent or move away from supporting national certification evaluation programs.

State Agency Estimates of Need for Interpreters with National and/or State Credentials.

When asked if the current number of available interpreters with either national or state credentials was sufficient to meet the needs of the state agency in serving their consumers, 41 of 45 states reported the current supply of interpreters in their states was insufficient. The respondents were then asked to make estimates of how many more interpreters with national and/or state credentials are needed to meet the needs of the agency and its consumers.

Table 1
Number of Credentialed Interpreters Used During
Fiscal Year 1989-90 and Type of Credentials by Region

Region	NUMBER USED											
	National Certification Range						State Certification Range					
	1-19	20-39	40-59	60-79	80-99	100+	1-19	20-39	40-59	60-79	80-99	100+
I. New England				X								X
II. Northeast ^a												
III. Mid Atlantic	X						X					
IV. Southeast						X					X	
V. North Central						X						X
VI. South Central	X						X					
VII. Middle West	X											
VIII. Rocky Mountains	X									X		
IX. Pacific Coast		X										X
X. Northwest				X								

^a Number Used for National and/or State not Reported

Table 2 provides estimates of the number of interpreters with national and/or state credentials needed within each RSA geographical region. The regions with the greatest need for nationally certified interpreters were regions II (Northeast) and V (North Central) respectively, followed by Regions IV (Southeast), VII (Middle West), and X (Northwest). Region II estimated a need for 100 or more nationally certified interpreters whereas Region V estimated a need for 60 or more nationally certified interpreters. Regions IV, VII, and X reported a need for 40-59.

The regions reporting the highest need for interpreters with state level credentials were Regions II (Northeast) and IX (Pacific Coast),

followed by Regions V (North Central) and IV (Southeast). Both Regions II and IX estimated a need for 100 or more interpreters with state level credentials. Readers are referred to Anderson and Carnahan (1993) for information on the reported needs for interpreters by individual state for each of the 10 RSA geographical regions.

Finally, the reported needs of the state VR agencies for additional interpreters should be viewed with caution. For some states the need for additional interpreters may be greater than that reported in Table 2. It is possible that the respondents' estimates may have been influenced by factors such as state agency budgetary constraints. Other possible mediating factors include the

anticipated number of students graduating from local interpreter education and preparation programs and the length of time generally required for many aspiring interpreter program graduates to obtain national certification.

Ranking of State Needs and Priorities. In order to ascertain which of six priority areas listed in the study questionnaire were perceived to be most important for enhancing the delivery of interpreting services in their states, the respondents ranked each of the six areas from (6) most important to (1) least important. The top four priority areas in order of rank are as follows:

Table 2
State Agency Estimates of Number of Additional Interpreters Needed by Region

Region	NUMBER NEEDED by CERTIFICATION ^A											
	National Certification Range						State Certification Range					
	1-19	20-39	40-59	60-79	80-99	100+	1-19	20-39	40-59	60-79	80-99	100+
I. New England	X							X				
II. Northeast						X						X
III. Mid Atlantic	X						X					
IV. Southeast			X						X			
V. North Central				X						X		
VI. South Central		X						X				
VII. Middle West			X					X				
VIII. Rocky Mountains		X						X				
IX. Pacific Coast		X										X
X. Northwest			X				X					

^A Six response categories were used to report estimates. The six categories were: 1) 1-19, 2) 20-39, 3) 40-59, 4) 60-79, 5) 80-99, 6) 100 or more. The data are reported in this table by the highest number in each category.

1. Increase the supply of available contract interpreters within the state.
2. Increase the number of full-time positions for interpreters within state personnel classification systems.
3. Develop collaborative relationships with interpreter education programs and interpreter referral service agencies to help increase supply of qualified interpreters within the state.
4. Upgrade agency interpreter service fee schedules.

Clearly the top priority among state agencies is the need for a larger supply of qualified interpreters than is currently available. Also receiving high priority is the need for a larger number of full-time interpreter positions within the VR personnel classification system and other state agencies. The employment of additional full-time staff interpreters was viewed as one means for responding to the persistent shortage of qualified interpreters in rural areas. Furthermore, these priorities appear to be even more critical and urgent given the current political climate advocating a shift of more programs and authority from the federal government to the states and local communities.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Given the long-standing interest of the state/federal rehabilitation program in further enhancing the delivery of interpreting services to people who are deaf or hard of hearing, some suggestions for future directions and initiatives are presented.

1. State rehabilitation agencies should intensify efforts to develop cooperative relationships with interpreter education programs and

interpreter referral service agencies to increase the supply of qualified interpreters in their states.

2. The Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) should assume leadership in establishing a national task force to address more effective means to enhance the employment of full-time interpreters within the state/federal rehabilitation program.
3. State rehabilitation agencies should develop collaborative relationships with interpreter referral service centers to facilitate implementation of apprenticeship programs for prospective interpreters.
4. State rehabilitation agencies should intensify efforts to develop more effective database systems to readily access, track, and report the expenditures as well as the extent and quality of interpreting services provided to their consumers.

Conclusion

In spite of the persistent and chronic shortage of ample qualified interpreters, the state/federal rehabilitation program is making a concerted effort to meet the communication needs of consumers who are deaf or hard of hearing in the most effective ways possible. For example, the Rehabilitation Services Administration has awarded five-year grants to fund two national training projects and has recently begun, during Summer 1995, to select other recipients of five-year grants to fund at least one interpreter preparation program to serve multiple states within each of the 10 RSA geographical regions. The federal priorities specify that the missions of these national projects

address the needs of two traditionally underserved groups of deaf or hard of hearing consumers: a) persons who are deaf-blind, and b) persons from culturally diverse racial or ethnic groups.

These new federal funding initiatives, along with the enactment of ADA and the desire of Congress to shift more programs and authority to the states, offer both challenges and opportunities for state VR agencies. One such challenge is for state VR agencies to initiate closer collaborative relationships with the federally and non-federally funded interpreter preparation programs. Establishing closer collaborative relationships is one means by which state VR agencies can assume more proactive roles toward ensuring that their needs for additional qualified interpreters can be adequately met. A second challenge is to identify the best strategies for bringing interpreting service providers, state VR agencies, and consumers together to advocate at the local and state levels for the highest quality and most comprehensive array of interpreting services possible.

Author's Notes

The following publications focus on enhancing interpreter educational preparation and service delivery. Both publications are based on input obtained from national surveys of consumers of interpreting services, service providers, and interpreter educators.

Anderson, G.B. & Carnahan, S.C. (1993). State VR agency priorities for improving the delivery of interpreting services to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Little Rock, AR: University of Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Anderson, G.B. & Stauffer, L.K.
(1990). Identifying standards for the training of interpreters for deaf people. Little Rock, AR: University of Arkansas Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

Complimentary copies of these two publications can be ordered for \$2.00 each which includes shipping and handling (or \$4.00 for both). For more information contact:

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