



Access, Accountability for Sign Language Interpreting in WI

Imagine travelling in a foreign country and suddenly needing emergency medical attention. An interpreter is called to the hospital, but he or she isn't fluent in English. Suddenly, your access to critical medical care is 100% dependent on somebody who doesn't speak your language.

Unsettling, right? Well, this is the very real scenario faced by deaf people in Wisconsin today.

Current law and licensure regulations have created a perfect Catch-22: a serious shortage of experienced interpreters at the same time that rookie interpreters just out of school are allowed to interpret complex medical procedures, psychiatric appointments, and legal court proceedings.

Two forces created this mess. The accepted practice has been that after six years of initial licensing, interpreters must pass a national certification exam created by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) to attain permanent renewable licenses.

However, that exam has erroneously transformed so that now the national pass rate has plummeted from 77% to 19%. As a result, 28 highly skilled Wisconsin interpreters lost their licenses on September 1.

At the same time, current Wisconsin law allows newly-minted interpreters to work in any situation, including medical and legal procedures where a deaf person's life or livelihood could be at stake.

Responsible employers who provide interpreting services are caught between a rock and a hard place: they either must turn down business because their experienced professionals aren't currently licensed, or they can provide newbies just out of school and cross their fingers that the rookies don't screw up. A local company I'm familiar with had to turn down 73 jobs since September 1st because of this flawed system.

Luckily, there is a solution to this mess. Legislation currently before the Wisconsin Assembly and Senate (AB 589 / SB 465) would clarify alternatives to the hyper-restrictive RID exam. It would sanction an alternative test, create a tier system of Intermediate and Advanced Interpreters, and grandfather in professionals who have already passed the RID test.

Further, the bill protects consumers in critical situations by applying stiff fines and penalties for those who pose as a sign language interpreter.

Overall, this new bill will raise the quality and standard of services by appropriately placing interpreters in environments best suited to his or her skill level.

This in turn will restore the confidence of businesses and government agencies which require interpreters that there is a ready supply of skilled professionals they can match with their varied needs.

Please push your legislators to support competency, transparency, and efficiency by asking them to support AB 589 / SB 465.

Wisconsin State Representative Jonathan Brostoff represents Wisconsin's 19th Assembly District – which includes Milwaukee's east side, downtown, Riverwest, and Bay View.

Andrea Metzger is a sign language interpreter out of Milwaukee