Making Your Events Accessible to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

By: Amy Silver O'Leary

Many nonprofits have been working for years to define, refine, and implement their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As we know better, we do better, and sometimes new technologies can help as we seek to increase equity and create a sense of belonging for all community members.

One important aspect of inclusiveness is disability inclusion. Whether your nonprofit is getting back to in-person gatherings or still holding virtual events, you will want to ensure that events of all kinds are accessible to people of all abilities.

In this article, we've curated resources and outlined strategies that can help individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing feel welcomed and participate fully.

These days, almost everyone has become more comfortable with remote technology. Options such as closed captioning, live transcripts, and American Sign Language interpreting are more available than ever, even to organizations on a tight budget.

We spoke with Jeff Bravin, Executive Director of the nonprofit American School for the Deaf, who is deaf, and who generously shared his thoughts with us for this

article during a Zoom interview with an ASL interpreter.

American Sign Language (ASL)

ASL is a complete language, separate and distinct from English. For many community members born deaf, ASL is their first language and English is their second language. For some deaf audience members, providing captioning rather than an ASL interpreter is essentially forcing them to translate into another language while they read. Transcription of the words being spoken won't convey the same nuance or even the actual meaning for deaf ASL speakers.

"Within our community we have deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind community members," explained Jeff Bravin. "Each of those groups has different needs, and we have to adjust our approach. Zoom captioning is great for some. Somebody like me may be able to read and write just as well as anyone else, but for other individuals, ASL is their native language; they would rather watch an event in their native language. It's akin to a native Spanish speaker who can read some English but may prefer to attend events in Spanish."

Ask Your Audience about Their Needs

"The best way to know what your audience will need is to ask them," Jeff said. "Send out your registration form asking, 'What accommodations do you need?' Allow your audience to let you know."

We asked Zoe Schwartz, who helps line up both ASL interpretation and captioning for the CT Community Nonprofit Alliance (The Alliance), the statewide association of community nonprofits in Connecticut, about her experience. "We have a handful of members who need ASL interpretation at our conferences," Zoe said. "For our in-person conferences, we always ask if participants need any accommodations. If they answer 'yes,' we reach out individually, asking how we could best meet their needs. Our members are pretty proactive about reaching out to us as well." When there are attendees requiring ASL interpretation, the Alliance is fortunate to have a close relationship with the American School for the Deaf, which is located in West Hartford, CT. In fact, Zoe put us in touch with Jeff Bravin for this article.

Finding An ASL Interpreter

The American School for the Deaf actually has its own agency that offers sign language interpreting services to the public on a fee for service basis, [Source Interpreting](#).

"There are thousands of agencies in the United states that provide ASL interpreter services, both in-person and virtually," said Jeff Bravin. He added that some interpreters have special expertise, such as legal or medical. "Networking is the best way to find folks," according to Jeff. "Reach out, get people's opinions. If I were to fly out to Chicago, I'd call my friends in Chicago and ask them: who are the best interpreters in town?" If you're holding a local event and your deaf participant is local, "Ask the deaf person," Jeff advised. "They'll tell you which one is best locally."

Brandice Mazick, an ASL interpreter for Temple University for more than two decades, is a regular interpreter for Disability Pride Philadelphia events, working through an agency. Brandice pointed out there's an extreme shortage of ASL interpreters, especially for in-person events. "Make sure you give your event participants a deadline by when they need to request accommodation, so that you have – at bare minimum – at least two weeks to line up your interpreter," she advised.

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) offers a [directory of member ASL interpreters](#) holding various levels of certification. RID also provides state-specific information and links to state RID members. The National Association of the Deaf has developed a [directory of interpreters](#), indicating those who are available for video-based interpretation. These are not agencies, but directories, and both organizations offer other resources.

You can also seek referrals to interpreters from your [state office serving people with disabilities](#) or from one of [38 state agencies for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing](#).

ASL – In-Person or Virtual?

Brandice Mazick advised that in-person interpretation should always be provided for in-person events, while virtual interpreting is fine for virtual events. Virtual interpreting and in-person interpreting are similar in cost, although sometimes it can be easier to find an interpreter virtually.

Jeff Bravin agreed that, with an in-person event, having an in-person interpreter is always ideal. "If there's a virtual interpreter at an in-person event, there's no way for the interpreter to check in with the deaf individual to make sure they're being understood," he pointed out.

Brandice also cautioned that, if an event lasts more than two hours, you will need to plan on having at least two interpreters. Physically and mentally, interpreters will need to take breaks. An agency can provide more guidance.

How Can Our Small Nonprofit Afford an ASL Interpreter?

Jeff Bravin said that corporations are increasingly more willing to sponsor accommodations at events.

Some foundations and state arts commissions also provide support for ASL interpreters at events. For foundations and corporations committed to equity, supporting accessibility for nonprofit events is an opportunity to honor that commitment.

Brandice said that it's worth asking agencies if they are willing to negotiate a discounted price for nonprofits.

Jeff Bravin's Zoom Tips for Virtual Meetings with an ASL Interpreter

"I use Zoom quite a bit because it offers more features than other platforms, and also is simple to use. We've tested various video platforms, and none beat the video quality of Zoom. That's vital for us when it comes to signing and being able to see." The company has also been very receptive to adapting and revising its platform for more accessibility, according to Jeff.

Jeff shared the following tips for accommodating deaf participants during Zoom video events:

- When we have more than a few deaf participants, we typically turn off all videos except for the presenter and the interpreter. If you then turn on your

video, it's like raising your hand. When people are finished sharing, they close their video. With only two or three videos open at one time, the screen continues to remain accessible.

- Then, attendees should [hide all participants who have their videos turned off](). That way participants only see the presenter, the interpreter, and anyone commenting or asking a question.
- If there are fewer people in the meeting, Jeff said, when he hosts he sometimes leaves all videos open on the screen so all can see each other. A maximum of nine windows open on a computer screen is probably comfortable for a deaf viewer. On a phone, the maximum is more like four videos open at a time; an iPad might be able to go up to six. Sometimes when someone is accessing a meeting through their phone, they may ask the host to reduce the number of open videos.
- Participants can use the "pin" feature to keep the interpreter and speaker's video on their screen. Meeting hosts can use the spotlight feature to spotlight the presenter and the interpreter. This is especially important for deaf-blind community members, who won't be able to use the "pin" feature.
- With Zoom webinars, the only way for non-speaker participants to communicate is via the chat feature. That's nice for people who can read and write, but for those for whom ASL is their primary language, chat is not beneficial. Jeff therefore prefers Zoom meetings to webinars. If you're doing a large Zoom meeting, encourage attendees to use "speaker view," and then have the host spotlight the person's video.
- During screensharing, the videos are minimized and tiny. At that point deaf participants are completely lost. If you're screensharing, limit open videos to three. Also when screensharing, be aware that deaf individuals can't read the screen and view the interpreter at the same time. Make sure you give them time to read the screen first, and then view the discussion. When you're ready to return to the discussion, be sure to close out the screenshare and return the videos to full-size.

Note that Microsoft Teams, GoToMeeting, and other video meeting platforms have their own solutions for ensuring a live interpreter stays visible on the screen alongside the presentation.

Captioning

Even if you're certain your event won't need an ASL interpreter, captioning will help some attendees to follow the conversation better. For example, people with shaky internet connections or dial-up will be able to follow the captions even if the video and sound are spotty. Captioning can also allow viewers to watch recorded video with the sound off. "For a recent virtual event at the Alliance," said Zoe Schwartz, "we spoke with everyone who needed accommodation, and we learned that it was important for us to have both the captioning and the interpreter present."

Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART), also known as real-time captioning, is the instant translation of spoken words into text on the screen. Real-time, manual captioning is usually better than automatic machine-generated captioning, if you can afford it. You can prep a manual (human) captioner with advance information about how various speakers' names are spelled, what terms of art and acronyms will be used, and other details to help them with accuracy. (In general, avoid using acronyms at all during public events! Acronyms can be exclusive in several different ways.) There are many businesses that provide real-time captioning in English and other languages, as well as captioning or transcription after the event and other services. [Zoom provides a feature to enable](#) real-time manual captioning, and many other meeting platforms have such features as well.

As with locating an ASL interpreter, you can ask your networks for recommendations for a reliable real-time captioning company.

The University of Washington's Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology Center offers [excellent resources that can help nonprofits plan video presentations](#) so that they are accessible. For example, videos should be shot (or streamed) so that critical visual content does not appear where captioning will cover it.

Machine-generated captioning ("live transcription")

Zoom can provide [automatic, machine generated real-time captioning](#) (in English only) at no additional cost. Somewhat confusingly, the term for automatic, machine-generated captioning that happens in real time is "live transcription."

With Zoom, both real-time (manual) captioning and live transcription (machine-generated) will work in meetings, webinars, and Zoom rooms. (Zoom rooms are different than breakout rooms. Live transcription does not work in breakout rooms.)

Participants in Zoom meetings and webinars can also request to have live transcription enabled during the session (anonymously if they wish). The host can then accept or decline the request.

When Zoom captions are being generated, whether manually or automatically, each participant has the option of turning the captions on or off on their own screen. Participants using the Zoom desktop app can also change the size of caption and chat text under Settings>Accessibility.

In general, the accuracy of machine-generated transcription like that offered by Zoom and other services is improving, but it's still not as accurate as human captioning or transcription. [This guidance from the University of Maryland](#) offers tips for improving machine-generated transcription, and also provides information on privacy and accessibility that will be of interest to nonprofits in all states.

With Zoom's live transcription (machine-generated) feature, the captions only appear during the live presentation – they are not saved in the recording. However, the full transcript itself can be saved (make sure this feature is enabled in Settings before the event begins).

Transcribing recorded video

Once you have a recorded video, you can take advantage of [YouTube's captioning feature](#), either automatic or manual. YouTube's automatic captioning – available in more than a dozen languages – can be edited to improve accuracy before the video is published.

If you have Zoom Business, Education, or Enterprise licenses with cloud recording, there is a feature that [automatically transcribes the audio](#) of a cloud-recorded video, available in English only. The transcript can be edited (and will probably need to be, for accuracy). It is saved as a separate file, but you have the option to display the text within the video, similar to closed captioning.

Conclusion: a whole new world

"Honestly, the pandemic has helped to transform accessibility issues for deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind community members," said Jeff Bravin. "We're seeing a tremendous shift, it's a very different world we're in now. More corporations are supporting accessibility for churches and synagogues, for example. I can attend a synagogue in California now, where they have a deaf Rabbi who is able to provide services in American Sign Language, my natural language. I would have had to fly out there before."

Additional Resources:

- [Captioning and Sign Language Interpretation in Zoom: Features and Pitfalls](#) (Web AIM, December 2022)