



EVERYONE'S INVITED

INCLUDING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

TWELVE TIPS FOR A

SUCCESSFUL SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER SET UP

Deaf patrons often face obstacles when they attend musical events. For example, there can be no apparent way to reach festival organizers to request interpreters, or no response after repeated emails. There may be little attention given to interpreter placement so the patrons cannot see the interpreters. There can even be misunderstanding about how deaf people could possibly appreciate music!

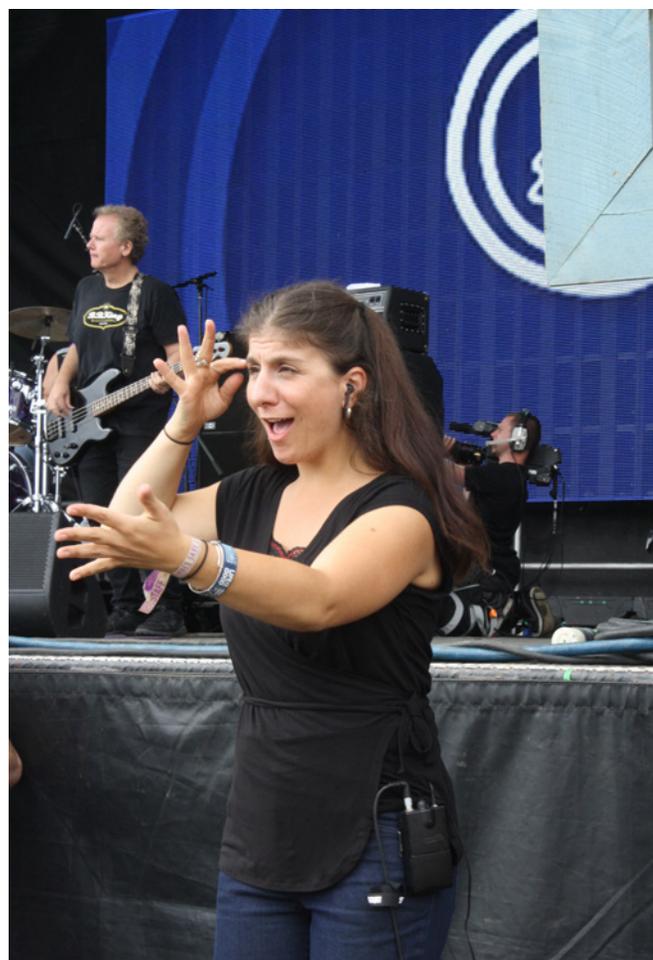
"I love attending music festivals because it is a way for me to experience an artists' presence and to engage with the audience around me. I feel the beat and the interpreters complete the connection," said deaf patron Joseph Hill, Assistant Professor, Department of American Sign Language and Interpreting Education, Rochester Institute of Technology. He continues, "Music is not solely an auditory experience. It is an artistic experience. It is a medium that facilitates meaningful human connections between artists and fans including deaf people who appreciate music through all the senses they have."

Each festival is unique and producers manage their American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter services in various ways. There is certainly room for differences but some aspects of your service need focused attention in order to satisfy your deaf patrons and to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA requires that you provide effective communication and qualified interpreters.

In an ideal world there would be interpreting services for every performance at every festival, but that is unrealistic. Festivals have multiple stages with many performances on each stage. Finding enough qualified interpreters to cover every performance can be difficult to impossible. Most festivals provide interpreting services upon request.

Let's discuss some of the essential aspects of creating a successful ASL Interpreter service.

- 1. Request for Services:** Make sure that your website has easy-to-find information about your Access Program and your ASL services. Provide an email address and assign a person to respond to these inquiries in a timely manner. Be sure to ask for advance notice of the need for ASL services. Do your research and find out how long it will take to recruit interpreters in your area. Asking for one or two month's notice is not unreasonable, as the interpreters need time to prepare, but you must also be willing to try to fulfill last minute requests when possible. In high demand areas like New York City, you may need more time to book the most highly skilled interpreters. You may want to ask the patrons for a ticket confirmation number before contracting with the interpreters.



At the 2013 Life is good Festival, interpreter Holly Maniatty is on a raised platform in front but to the side of the stage and is using an in-ear monitor to help her hear the lyrics more clearly. PHOTO CREDIT: Gretchen Ingersoll

- 2. Specific Communication Requests:** Not all deaf patrons communicate the same way. Some will want the lyrics translated into ASL; some will prefer a word-for-word English translation. A deaf-blind person may need tactile sign language. There are other options as well. Ask patrons about their language needs as soon as they connect with you, and then inform the interpreting team when you have this information.

3. **Recruiting Qualified Interpreters:** Interpreting music is a specialized skill. You are required to recruit interpreters who have this skill but you also want interpreters with experience. Interpreting at a festival can be grueling work, hot, long hours, last minute lyrics, distracting crowd, fans with phones posting videos. This job is not for the faint of heart or your friend who knows a little ASL. While almost all interpreters with this level of skill and experience are certified, be sure that at least one member of your ASL team is certified by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in the event that emergency security or medical interpreting is needed. You may use an agency or recruit interpreters on your own. If you have a large team of half a dozen or more interpreters, I've found it very helpful to designate a Lead Interpreter to help recruit, organize, and schedule the team.
4. **Placement of the Interpreter:** Position the interpreter where the deaf patrons can see both the musicians and interpreter in one line of sight. Patrons should not have to swivel their heads back and forth. While there are other possible locations, I am going to focus on what I have seen to be the best solution. Place interpreters in the security or press pit, on a raised 4'x4' platform, set in front of the stage but off-center, usually on the same side as the monitor engineer's console, not in front of but on the stage side of the speaker tower. The height of the platform depends on the height of the stage but might be about 2 to 3 feet high. Provide a sturdy, stable step or stairs so that the interpreters can get up and down safely. Some festivals have so much activity in this area, filming, extra security, and so forth, that it is not safe to place the interpreter in front of the stage.
5. **Placement of the Patrons:** Deaf patrons are usually best served when they are up front by the speakers so that they can feel the vibrations and are close enough to see the expressions on the faces of the musicians and the interpreters as this is an important part of communication and helps provide equal access. Bike rack or barricade a reserved viewing area for your deaf patrons and their companions, and provide a way for them to get to this area. Make signage using the ASL Interpreter symbol showing where this area is and how to get there. Don't forget to train your Access Team and the other staff about the location of these viewing areas and put these locations on your patron map.
Another option worth noting is a "Deaf Zone" like the one created at the 2015 Grateful Dead concert in Chicago. This Facebook post describes the scene well, although you will find other accounts by searching for "Deaf Zone Grateful Dead."
6. **Set Lists:** It is best to provide a set list weeks in advance so that the interpreters have adequate time to study the lyrics. Lyrics are poetry and usually require more than just



At this festival logistics make it difficult to position the interpreter in front of the stage. Dean Tester interprets on a raised viewing platform set back in the audience. PHOTO CREDIT: Laura Grunfeld

a word-for-word interpretation. It takes a great deal of study to get at the true meaning of the song. Remember that the interpreters are often covering many performances and they need plenty of time for their research. Performers often have a deep catalog of music so we should help the interpreters by limiting the amount of preparation they need to do.

Unfortunately, many musicians refuse to release their set lists or do not even create a set list, until shortly before they take the stage. Musicians may be concerned about confidentiality but they should be assured that professional interpreters know that their certifications can be revoked if they were ever to leak such confidential information. The Artist Relations team should make a concerted effort to obtain the set lists in advance. When they are not able to, arrangements need to be made to get the set lists as soon as possible once the performers are on site. I cannot stress enough how important set lists are to a truer, more accurate interpretation of the music. This benefits the musicians as well as the patrons.

7. **In-Ear Monitors:** Vocals-only in-ear monitors make it possible for the interpreter to hear what is being said or sung over the instruments and crowd noise. The interpreters sometimes bring their own headphones but the production company needs to provide the monitors. Wireless units are best. It is helpful if there are two monitors so that the transition is seamless when the interpreters swap positions during the show.
8. **Lighting:** For nighttime performances, if the ambient light is not consistent or bright enough, then provide a dedicated stage light, focused on the interpreter. It should

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be a soft light that illuminates several feet around the upper body, from the knees up, as the interpreter may move around with outstretched arms. The light should not cast deep shadows on the face of the interpreter, as facial expressions are an important part of the interpretation. Nor should it blind the interpreter or the performer.

9. **Seating:** Seating: Interpreters almost always work in teams of two or more. Make sure there is room for all of the interpreters in their working area. Ask if they want seating and provide chairs for all if they do. The active interpreter will stand on the platform facing the audience. Their team interpreter(s) sit facing them, their backs to the audience, to offer support by looking up lyrics and feeding signs. This teamwork helps provide an effective interpretation.
10. **Proper Credentials:** Interpreters must be able to get from stage to stage and to their work areas easily. They must be able to go back stage to fetch set lists, use the facilities, and get water.
11. **Other Considerations:** Interpreters are highly skilled team members. Consider their other needs and expenses and, like other staff, include them in plans for meals, housing, parking, transportation, festival t-shirts, complimentary tickets, etc.
12. **Feedback:** You may not get it all right the first time. Ask for feedback from your patrons and your interpreters and work to improve your services each year.

The primary purpose of the ASL program is to serve your deaf patrons and give them just as meaningful a fan experience as your hearing patrons, but you will find the service benefits your festival in many ways and is worth the extra effort and investment of resources. Hearing fans frequently comment how moving it is to see the interpreters at work. Staff and festival workers often express their pride that the festival is providing the service. Of course, being in compliance with the law helps to avoid litigation. You will also find that a strong ASL program is a visible demonstration of your event's commitment to including your entire community and sharing your treasure-trove of music with all.

I want to thank the many interpreters who have given me much needed advice over the years. I hate to leave people out but a few who have been most helpful over a long period of time, and who are supremely experienced and knowledgeable, are Dave J. Coyne, Holly C. J. Maniatty, and Jessica Minges. I am most grateful for their expert guidance. I send a special shout out to Dave and Holly who helped tremendously with this article.

Laura Grunfeld writes a regular column helping producers make their events accessible to people with disabilities. Suggest topics to her by writing to Laura@EveryonesInvited.com. She has worked many festivals across the nation and readers can learn more about her event accessibility consulting, training, and production company at www.EveryonesInvited.com, www.linkedin.com/in/lauragrunfeld, www.youtube.com/lauragrunfeld, www.facebook.com/everyones.festival, www.instagram.com/everyonesfestival.

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