"I Don’t Do Deaf-Blind"

By Rhonda Jacobs, CI and CT, Maryland

"I don’t do Deaf-Blind." An oft-repeated phrase in the world of interpreting. The phrase leads naturally to several questions: Why not? Who does? Who should? So only Deaf people have a right to interpreters, and for Deaf-Blind people, are they willing to learn? The title of the grant for the ten federal interpreter training programs now reads “Training of Interpreters for Individuals Who Are Deaf and Individuals Who Are Deaf-Blind." Why? Because this segment of the population has historically been overlooked; because if Interpreter Training Programs do not start training interpreters who are as skilled in working with Deaf-Blind people as they are in working with the Deaf people, yet another generation will go by where the only interpreters serving Deaf-Blind people's needs are those who happened to fall into it, or have some “connection,” something like the general field of interpreting prior to the 1970s.

Even in program/event announcements proclaiming “accessibility”, are services (interpreting or otherwise) “available to persons who are Deaf or hard of hearing,” or “Deaf, hard of hearing or Deaf-Blind”? Is Deaf-Blind presumed under the categories of Deaf and hard of hearing? If so, why are the majority of the available interpreters or service providers unable to meet the need (have skill and knowledge in working with people who are Deaf-Blind)? Our field is in a period of redefining itself, as many fields in the global economy. Are we “generalists” or “specialists”? If we take the “specialist” approach, then I and about half a dozen other hearing interpreters and maybe a dozen Deaf interpreters in my area are about it. For a major metropolitan area with a population of about 4.5 million, the odds of supply meeting demand are not very good. That is, with such a large total population, there has to be a fairly large number of Deaf-Blind people, and also quite a large number of interpreters. When only about half a dozen of those (hearing) interpreters are skilled in working with Deaf-Blind people, that leaves the majority of Deaf-Blind people with interpreters who do not meet their needs. If we take the “generalist” approach, as seems to be starting with the federally funded Interpreter Training Programs, then a skilled interpreter should be able to “do Deaf-Blind” as well as they do.

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anything else. I often wonder why, when I go to events sponsored by our local Deaf-Blind organization, I am the only, or one of very few, hearing interpreters there, along with one or two professional Deaf interpreters, and a handful of others who are willing to come and help and do whatever they can (SSP - or "Support Service Provider" in the jargon) - which basically means asking people who are willing to help out, yet who are not trained interpreters, to do Deaf-Blind interpreting work, which, as can be seen in other articles in this issue, is more complex, not less, than regular interpreting work.

If it is not already obvious, the purpose of this article is to recruit. Those of us who “do Deaf-Blind,” cannot do it all. And, since Deaf-Blind interpreting is often more physically intense than other types, the need is even greater to prevent physical burnout. One of the most challenging, fascinating, fun, exhausting and addictive forums where this type of interpreting takes place is the biennial AADB (American Association of the Deaf-Blind) convention. It is one of the places where the need is greatest, yet the numbers are dwindling. Why? Because there are approximately 300 Deaf-Blind people who attend these conventions, and the interpreters who “do Deaf-Blind” are often left to do the work of two or three people alone.

No matter how much an interpreter enjoys being there, is committed, dedicated and among friends, if they are physically taxed to the breaking point, they may not return. One more skilled interpreter lost. The result? Even more work for those who are left, or, telling the Deaf-Blind people, some of whom only get community interaction once every two years, “Sorry, we don’t have enough interpreters.”

Yes, this is a plea. We need you. There are several options available to you. If you’ve never really thought about going to an AADB Convention, think about it, even if it will be your first exposure to the Deaf-Blind world. The next one is June 13-19, 1998 in Connecticut. If you’ve never gone to a Deaf-Blind event in your area, go to one. If you’ve passed up the Deaf-Blind workshops and training opportunities, take the next one that you see. If you have found yourself saying, “I don’t do Deaf-Blind,” ask yourself, “Why not?” Unless you can come up with a really compelling reason, I urge you to start.

Listed below are eight ways to help you get started.

1) Organize a workshop in your area.

2) Attend an activity sponsored by your local Deaf-Blind organization - meet the people, volunteer to SSP (interpret, guide, do any odd jobs necessary).

3) Attend the AADB Convention in Connecticut, June 13-19, 1998. For registration information, contact Joy Larson, AADB National Office, 814 Thayer Avenue, Suite 302, Silver Spring, MD 20910 tty:(301) 588-6545, fax:(301) 588-8705, E-mail: aadb@erols.com

4) Join AADB and receive their quarterly publication, The Deaf-Blind American. Dues are only $15.00 per year. See address above.

5) Call someone you know who “does Deaf-Blind” and ask them to mentor you - go with them to events and jobs, watch them work, ask questions, talk with the Deaf-Blind person there.

6) Get a copy of one or both videotapes available from SMI (Sign Media, Inc.) on Deaf-Blind Communication and Community.

7) Read “Guidelines: Practical Tips for Working and Socializing with Deaf-Blind People” by Theresa Smith. (available from SMI)

8) Spend some time in Seattle and meet the thriving Deaf-Blind community there.
A Glossary of Some Communication Methods Used With Deaf-Blind People

By Sheryl B. Cooper, PhD, IC/TC, RSC, Maryland
Photographs by Sheryl B. Cooper

Every Deaf-Blind person is unique. All Deaf-Blind people do not have the same types and degrees of hearing and vision loss, the same age at onset of Deaf-Blindness, the same educational background, the same amount and type of family support, and the same confounding disabling conditions. Thus, if you have ten Deaf-Blind people in a room, you will probably see ten different forms of communication occurring. Each Deaf-Blind individual has a preferred mode of communication (visual for those with some vision, auditory for those with some hearing, or tactile). Each Deaf-Blind person also has preferences regarding the language (ASL or English) and exact method or system of communication. It is impossible to prescribe one or two methods of communication that will be effective for all Deaf-Blind people.

An interpreter should obtain as much information as possible about a Deaf-Blind individual and allow time in advance to interact with a Deaf-Blind consumer to determine the best mode, language, and method to use. Outlined below are several methods of communication that interpreters should be familiar with in order to work with a wide range of Deaf-Blind people. This list is not intended to be exhaustive; many Deaf-Blind people have created their own very individualized effective methods for communication. The methods described below can be used either for direct communication or for interpreting.

Method Not Requiring Special Training

Print on Palm/Print on Back: The communicator prints in large block capital letters in the palm of the Deaf-Blind person’s hand. Each letter is written in the same location as the preceding letters. For Deaf-Blind people with decreased sensitivity in the nerve endings of the hand, a pen with its cap on may be used to apply more pressure than a finger or fingernail. Another alternative is printing large capital block letters on the Deaf-Blind person’s back.

Small Sign Language: Deaf-Blind individuals with some remaining vision may prefer to use their vision as their primary source of information. The communicator can sign using a very small signing space near the mouth. Some signs normally located far from the mouth (father, dog, Russia) may need to be adjusted.

Tracking Signing: This method is frequently used by individuals with Usher Syndrome whose vision is deteriorating but still usable. The Deaf-Blind individual holds the forearms of the communicator and follows the signing visually with their eyes, using their hands to know where to look.

Methods Requiring Special Knowledge or Training

Tadoma: The Deaf-Blind person places his hand on the mouth, cheek, and chin of the communicator. The Deaf-Blind person reads the spoken message by feeling the vibrations of the vocal cords, nasal cavity, and the formation of the lips. This is a way for Deaf-Blind people to receive information; it works best with those who are able to speak their own responses.

FingerBraille: The communicator uses six fingers in the positions for typing Braille to “type” on the Deaf-Blind person’s hands as if they were typewriter keys. Skilled Deaf-Blind individuals are also able to read Braille typed on their backs, shoulders, or other body parts if there is a close relationship between the communicator and the Deaf-Blind person. This method was developed in Japan and is not widely used in the United States at this time.

Alphabet Card: This is an embossed index card with the letters of the alphabet raised. The communicator places the fingertip of the Deaf-Blind person’s index finger on the desired letters to feel the shape of the
raised letter. This is a way for Deaf-Blind people to receive information; it works best with those who are able to speak their own responses.

**Braille Alphabet Card:** This is similar to the alphabet card, with the Braille dots raised instead of letter shapes for the Deaf-Blind person to feel. Ink-printed letters are printed together with the Braille for the sighted person.

**Tellatouch:** This is a machine that looks like a manual typewriter with one Braille cell located opposite the keyboard. The communicator types on a standard keyboard to the Deaf-Blind person and as each letter is typed, the machine mechanically creates each Braille letter for the Deaf-Blind person to read, one letter at a time. This works best with those who are able to speak their own responses.

**TeleBraille:** This method of communicating utilizes current technology developed for telephone use as a form of interpersonal communication. The communicator types on a TTY keyboard. The information is transmitted to the TeleBraille where the Deaf-Blind individual is able to read series of twenty Braille cells and then request the next set of twenty Braille cells. The Deaf-Blind individual is able to control the speed at which the Braille is sent from the TTY to the TeleBraille. The Deaf-Blind individual can respond by typing (either Braille or on the standard keyboard) and the communicator can read the print message on the TTY display screen.

**Braille Tape:** The communicator types in Braille and the letters are embossed on a long, thin strip of paper resembling a reel-to-reel tape for the Deaf-Blind person to read immediately or at a later time. This tape can be rolled like a reel-to-reel tape and preserved for later use, or discarded. This is an effective way for Deaf-Blind people to store information such as addresses, phone numbers, or conversations that may need to be saved or repeated. This piece of equipment is used primarily in Europe and Japan at the present time.

VIEWS December 1997
Deaf-Blind Interpreting 101

By Rhonda Jacobs, CI and CT, Maryland

The need for training in the area of Deaf-Blind interpreting cannot be overemphasized. The demand for qualified interpreters far outweighs the supply. The workshops and training opportunities that do exist are too few and far between, and rarely cover the breadth and depth of information that is available and vital for a quality interpretation to take place. Realizing the need for training, the need for services, and the gap that exists between the two, below are some basic guidelines and points to keep in mind when interpreting with a Deaf-Blind person.

Vision and Use of Space

"Deaf-Blind" does not always mean "tactile". More often than not, the Deaf-Blind person you will be working with has some vision. The first question then is, Where can this person see? If they cannot see below your neckline or chest, don't let your hands go lower than that. There are other ways to sign RUSSIA or BABY. The term "close vision," often used to describe this type of interpreting, is sometimes a misnomer. If the person has Usher's Syndrome (which includes tunnel vision), you may have to be far away. If they also have cataracts, you may have to be very close and sign very small. Depending on lighting and eye strain, a person may go back and forth between tactile, watching and tracking (their hand on your forearm). Contrasting clothing colors are only effective when they are directly behind your hands, therefore, necklines may need to be high and your hands kept in front of you. If standing on a platform, fingerspell in front of your body, not near your face or out to the side.

Clothing

The need for solid, highly contrasting colors to your skin cannot be overemphasized. In addition, some people have sensitivities to certain colors, or have colors that work better for them. Check with the individual. In a group setting with several Deaf-Blind people, you may be expecting to work with a person who is fully Deaf-Blind and not worry about your clothing. However, after arrival, you may find yourself working with someone who has some vision, or find yourself chatting with people with varying degrees of vision. Dress so anyone with whom you may interact can see you. Keep jewelry to a minimum. In addition, be wary of perfumes/colognes—you may be sitting in very close proximity to the person you are working with or talking to.

Background

Check the background of where you are sitting/standing, make sure it is also an appropriate contrasting color. Is there a cloth, sheet, large piece of paper, blackboard/whiteboard that can be placed behind you?

Lighting

Check the lighting. "Average" lighting may not be bright enough. Look for the brightest spot in the room. Request/find an additional lamp or spotlight if necessary.

Pacing

Slow down. Articulate each and every sign and handshape. Pause between sentences. Check for comprehension. Vision is not always consistent, and our signing speed, articulation, location, etc. is not always consistent. For whatever reason, words/signs may need to be repeated. You may be sure you signed something accurately and "clearly", but the Deaf-Blind person simply may not have seen it. Be ready to repeat anything at any time.

Identifying

Always identify who is speaking, including yourself as the interpreter. Make yourself a seating chart with who is in the room if you need help remembering names.

Visual Environment

The interpreter is the Deaf-Blind person's eyes as well as ears. Therefore "modifying" how you sign the message is only one part of the job. The other part is what you see. Ask yourself: Where are we? Who/what is here? How are people acting? Is everyone standing around chatting? Has the event begun and you are late? How many people are here? Where is available seating? Answering these questions is part of your job - you are interpreting the visual environment. Ask the Deaf-Blind person where they would like to
sit, how the chairs should be arranged - next to each other? facing each other? if at a table, next to each other? on a corner? right or left? Is there anyone they are looking for or would like to talk to?

Teaming

For the back-up interpreter, pay attention to and monitor both the primary interpreter and the Deaf-Blind person at all times. If you notice something that the primary interpreter may need to re-do or that the Deaf-Blind person missed, either alert the interpreter as to what is needed or supply the Deaf-Blind person with the missing information they need.

Language Use

Deaf-Blind interpreting does not mean one uses only English-like signing. Many Deaf people who use ASL still wish to continue using ASL even after they lose their vision. Limited or no vision does not preclude the use of ASL. Check with the individual.

Fatigue

Deaf-Blind interpreting, particularly tactile interpreting, can be physically strenuous. There are ways to lessen the fatigue. Examples: sit back in your chair rather than at the edge of your seat; rest your elbow on a table; place your foot on a foot rest and place your elbow on your knee; for someone who uses fingerspelling only, support your elbow with your non-dominant hand; discuss chair placement options with the Deaf-Blind person; switch with your teammate more often; if possible, ask for more frequent breaks in the proceedings; keep an open line of communication with the Deaf-Blind person to ensure both your needs are met.

If you are not sure about something - "rules", cues, signals, signing space, clothing, "Am I doing this right?", ask the Deaf-Blind person.

This is just a glance at some of the basics. Just as an entire interpreter training program or even a course cannot be condensed into one article, neither can the subject of Deaf-Blind interpreting. Much of what you will learn will happen by talking to Deaf-Blind people, talking to and working with experienced interpreters, taking workshops, going to Deaf-Blind events, etc. Research has begun on Deaf-Blind communication, interaction and interpreting, but it is just the beginning. We are all learning, every day. Start from wherever you are, then continue.

Outcomes of Ethical Practices Complaints to be Published

At the 1989 convention, the membership of RID voted to publish the outcomes of ethical practices complaints that are filed with the RID Ethical Practices System. The motion that passed was C89.15 and it reads as follows: “The results of grievance proceedings will be published in the VIEWS including the nature of the grievance and the action taken by RID. The names of individuals filing the grievance will remain confidential. Vindicated individuals will be given the opportunity to have their names published, even in cases of a less serious nature.”

Beginning with this issue, the outcome of cases filed after August of 1997 will be published in the “Ethical Practices System Report” of the VIEWS. The Report below has an example of the type of information that will be published.

Cases are not considered to be completed and therefore results will not be published until all parties’ rights to appeal a decision have been exhausted. In cases where no ethical violation is found, publication of the outcome will “only” be done if requested by the interpreter against whom the complaint was filed. In no instance will the names of those who filed the complaint be published. Information about the outcome of cases filed before August 1997 can be obtained from Clay Nettles at the National Office.

Ethical Practices System (EPS) Report

According to RID Convention motion C89.15, results of ethical practice system proceedings shall be published in the VIEWS. The information below includes the name of the person against whom a complaint was filed, case number, tenet(s) of the Code of Ethics allegedly violated in the complaint and action taken by the EPS.

Example: “Mary Interpreter, CI and CT, MD; case #9999.97; maintaining confidentiality; certification suspended until January 1, 1999.”

While the EPS is currently processing a number of active cases, there are no actual case outcomes to report at this time.
Team Structure for a Deaf-blind Student

By Betsy J. Dunn, CSC, California

The successful educational experience of a student who is deaf-blind is always the result of a team effort. It would be impossible for any parent, teacher, support staff or administrator to single-handedly ensure the educational/social success of a student requiring extensive support. The complex and multi-layered educational and social needs, preferences and styles of a deaf-blind student mandate a sophisticated network of support that can only be provided by a team of professional individuals who listen carefully and respond appropriately to the deaf-blind student.

The individual needs of a deaf-blind student are as varied as each student, and yet, the structure of the support team needed by this widely varying group is very similar. A successful support team for a deaf-blind student includes the following individuals:

Student
Parent
Administrator/Case Manager
Primary Support Teacher
Interpreters
Vision Teacher
Mobility Instructor

Team success requires that each team member have a clear understanding of their own role, the role of other team members, and how each member interacts and supports the other. Team members must actively share information and seek assistance from others. Equally important, they must be willing and able to put the needs of the student ahead of any personal issues or agendas. On-going team success requires constant communication, respect and competency in each and every role.

Role Definitions
The first and most important member of the team is the student. The student’s individual needs, preferences, and styles as they relate to communication and education must be addressed and accommodated by the support team’s efforts. Individual profiles of interest, potential and skills provide necessary direction for the student’s educational goals. As the student matures and is able to participate in his or her own IEP with increasing awareness and responsibility, the success of the support team will be reflected in the educational ownership and self-awareness of the student.

The parent is the driving force of his/her child’s educational experience. Without strong advocacy from the parent, it is too easy for a deaf-blind student to be underserved or not served at all. The parent provides essential input and direction in the IEP. Some educators might prefer the parent simply rubber stamp decisions made by school personnel. This, however, is not the most effective relationship for student success. The parent is able to bring a wealth of background information to school personnel — and through this information, the school staff can better understand and guide the student to academic/social success. Even when a full ensemble of professionals has been brought together to provide educational support, the parent still continues to be a vital team member. The need for parent input and direction is never-ending.

The administrator or case manager acts as the school site coordinator for the services and personnel providing support to the deaf-blind student. From the student’s perspective, the administrator/case manager may seem like a “silent partner” on the team. Although the case manager may not be the most visible team member, experience has proven that the case manager’s support, guidance and administrative skills interfacing with the school district is a vital element necessary for the team’s success. A good administrator can listen and learn about the issues of deaf-blindness and effectively oversee and coordinate these services.

The support team “teacher” may be called many different names: primary teacher, primary support teacher, teacher of the deaf, point person, or special education teacher. Whatever the name, this “teacher” is a pivotal team member who not only provides 1:1 teaching and tutoring, but also interfaces and coordinates with the general education teachers, interpreters, parents, and administration. Additionally, the primary support teacher must modify, adapt, and create materials necessary for the student to participate, understand and master the information presented in the general education during 1:1 instruction periods. The teacher must work closely with the student and parent to ensure that the educational direction and needs of the student are represented in the IEP document.

To the general school population, the interpreter provides the most visible support to the deaf-blind student; it is also a complicated and often misunderstood position on the team. The school district employee title of “interpreter” is generally inadequate and does not represent the variety of duties required by this position. The interpreter’s daily responsibilities are a blur of interpreter, tutor, social facilitator, and Service Support Provider (SSP) duties.

Functioning as the “interpreter,” this team member facilitates and creates the information and communication bridge necessary for social opportunities and educational experiences to occur. Deaf-blind interpreting requires specific knowledge and skills beyond those necessary for sign language interpreting. The interpreter literally brings the world to the student and the interpreter’s ability to clearly and accurately convey visual and auditory information — as well as social nuances — will determine the level to which the student can rise. Sensitivity, awareness, and training in deaf-blind issues and needs are required for the interpreter to suc-
cessfully support the deaf-blind student. The individual needs, desires, and preferences of the student must be respected and accepted during interpreting situations.

Educational interpreters sometimes find themselves in the dual job description of interpreter/tutor. This blurring of roles can be confusing to not only the student, but also to the interpreter and general education teacher. Clear definition and distinction are necessary for the successful blending of these roles.

While interpreting in a social setting, the interpreter for a deaf-blind student is called upon to “facilitate” social interaction with the general school population. This is an appropriate and necessary role to embrace, and yet it adds additional confusion of the interpreter’s roles and responsibilities. Continued professional development and growth are vital for the development of skills necessary to discern when and how to function as a facilitator while also maintaining respect and regard for the deaf-blind student’s social/emotional development and abilities.

In addition to functioning as interpreter, tutor, and social facilitator, the interpreter for a deaf-blind student also serves the student as a Service Support Provider (SSP). As an SSP, the interpreter will act as the deaf-blind student’s guide, lunch partner, or companion. The student’s personal needs or preferences for support will determine how and when the interpreter functions as an SSP.

Deaf-blind interpreters work under unusually close and intimate conditions with the deaf-blind student. This unusually close working relationship—as well as the intensity, which often accompanies it—is important to acknowledge and support. Too often, interpreters reach “burn-out” because these issues have not been anticipated, addressed, or supported. For this reason, it is preferable for the deaf-blind student to receive alternating services from at least 2 interpreters throughout the day.

The Braille and Mobility Instructors both provide specific training and expertise for the student and other team members. Their input regarding specific skills and strategies related to deaf-blindness are beneficial to all team members.

Communication of Role Definitions
Various methods may be used to define, establish and communicate the role of each team member within the team as well as to the general educators or other persons who are part of the larger support network. The roles and responsibilities of team members may be introduced to the general education teachers through an orientation meeting, which takes place before the beginning of each school semester.

During an orientation meeting, or in a 1:1 setting, a one to two-page “fact” sheet can be utilized to provide information addressing these questions/topics:

- Who is the student? What does s/he like to do?
- Functional aspects of vision and hearing: How much can s/he see or hear?
- Types of educational materials used: does s/he read Braille or print or both?
- Communication options in the classroom: sign language through the interpreter; writing, or gestures/body language.
- Define the interpreter’s role, responsibilities, and duties: Visual and auditory information is relayed and tutoring assistance is provided as necessary. Classroom behavior management is the responsibility of the teacher.
- Identify special space/environmental considerations: What seating arrangement is appropriate? Use of the overhead projector and movies.
- Describe how the student will complete class assignments: describe the 1:1 study support s/he receives.
- Indicate who and how the student will be graded.
- Provide a list of the names and phone numbers of all team members.

Role-playing may also be successfully employed during a teacher orientation as a means to demonstrate and clarify the role of the interpreter/tutor in the classroom setting.

Due to the fact that team members will naturally change over the years, and substitute teachers and interpreters will also require orientation information, a basic interpreting/teaching guide of practical information which addresses deaf-blind interpreting in general, and the individual student’s needs specifically, should be disseminated to facilitate the smooth transition of new or substitute team members.

Topics addressed in the interpreter/instructor guidelines for a deaf-blind student may include:

**Interpreter dress:** Clothing which contrasts the skin tone of the instructor/interpreter. If a particular color is preferred, this should be clearly stated.

**Getting started:** What to do when first meeting with the deaf-blind student

**Sign Language:** Preferences of the student.

**Lighting:** Optimal conditions and alternatives.

**Interpreting:** Guidelines, techniques, and strategies for deaf-blind interpreting: defining the expanded deaf-blind interpreter’s role as an “SSP” for the student; as well as identifying the language and communication preferences of the student.

**Mobility:** Strategies, techniques, and student preferences.

**Social Etiquette:** Student preferences/needs; general deaf-blind courtesies.

Technical support and assistance available through various national organizations, and schools serve as invaluable resources to the professional development and role definition of the student’s support team.

Team members should be encouraged and challenged to define, communicate, and nurture their professional skills so that they may better provide the support structure needed for student’s success.

Some parents may dream of finding an “Anne Sullivan” for their deaf-blind child; a person who might magically bring the “world” to their child. However, the strength and knowledge of a team provides a more powerful and dynamic educational experience than any single parent or teacher could ever dream of giving an individual who is deaf-blind.