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## **Rural Interpreter Training: Challenges, Gaps, and Opportunities**

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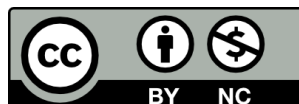
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### **Abstract**

Rural sign language interpreters often experience unique challenges, gaps, and opportunities in interpreter training compared to their urban peers. The paper examined the results of a needs assessment survey disseminated by the Improving Rural Interpreter Skills (IRIS) Project to identify stakeholders' perceptions of the challenges, gaps, and opportunities in rural interpreting. The 20-question survey was distributed by email to 279 rural interpreting stakeholders across the United States, of which 71 responded. Stakeholders' responses indicated significant challenges including systemic barriers to technology, living wages, and job security; gaps in formal training opportunities and limited exposure to diverse language models, peers, and mentors; and opportunities to increase professional networking and bring workshops and classes to rural interpreters in their local communities, both in person and remotely. The implications of this research were used in the design and delivery of IRIS Project's rural interpreter training, and stakeholders' perceived opportunities were integrated into the fabric of IRIS programming. Further, it will inform future research on approaches to improve the quality of and access to rural interpreter training.

## Rural Interpreter Training: Challenges, Gaps, and Opportunities

### Introduction

Prior to the professionalization of the field of sign language interpretation and the establishment of formal interpreter education programs (IEPs) in the United States, “traditional inroads centered deaf<sup>1</sup> people as they were responsible for the recruitment and training of sign language interpreters...” (Decker & Hardesty, 2022). Today, there are 55 four-year, 82 two-year and six graduate-level IEPs across 46 states and the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico (Garrett & Girardin, 2021). Interpreter practitioners are now more likely to receive their training formally via an institution of higher learning than through immersion in their local deaf communities (Ball, 2013; Williamson, 2015). However, many rural interpreters— those tapped to interpret by deaf friends, family members, and co-workers— are still introduced to the field informally through their authentic connections to deaf people. Others, including K12 employees who are recruited by their employers to interpret, may have little training or connection to deaf adults.

Access to quality interpreting services in rural areas across the country is undeniably challenging. Individuals functioning as interpreters in these areas commonly lack the comprehensive knowledge and skill sets required to provide equal communication access (Fisher, 2018; Fitzmaurice, 2017). Generally overlooked by training entities and professional organizations, these interpreters are consequently unable to attain the necessary and appropriately sequenced training that recognizes existing competencies, accumulate academic credentials, or acquire professional certification to improve their services (Shaffer, 2013; Trimble, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, the word ‘deaf’ is used with a lowercase d to apply to all deaf people regardless of their cultural identities.

Fewer rural interpreters attend and graduate from IEPs than their urban colleagues (Hardesty & Decker, 2021). The lack of formal training often creates barriers to employment opportunities. Many state licensing boards require national certification in order to attain the licensure needed to perform the duties of a professional interpreter. However, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc (RID), the largest professional organization, continuing education provider, and certifying body of sign language interpreters in the United States, requires a baccalaureate degree or completion of an extensive alternative pathway to sit for a national certification exam (Ball, 2013; Cogen & Cokely, 2015). “The field of interpreting continues to move forward, and rural interpreters are being left behind, which ultimately results in systemically inadequate, even discriminatory, communication access for (deaf) individuals in rural areas” (Johnson, Brown, Decker, & Hardesty, 2021).

To address the unique, specialized training needs of rural interpreters, the University of Northern Colorado’s Improving Rural Interpreter Skills (IRIS) Project was established as a five-year, \$2.1 million federal grant project through the U.S. Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration. The project proposed to increase the quantity and quality of interpreters living and working in rural areas, train rural mentors and facilitators, and explore digital credentialing systems that recognize demonstrated competencies toward academic credit and/or interpreting certification. To begin this work, the IRIS Project team posed a foundational research question to inform its curriculum development and program implementation: what do U.S. stakeholders perceive as challenges, gaps, and opportunities in rural interpreting?

### **Methodology**

Hardesty and Decker (2021) developed a needs assessment to collect data from rural stakeholders using Qualtrics, a cloud-based survey software. The survey had a mix of twenty

multiple choice, text entry, matrix table, and rank order questions. Each prompt was provided in a bilingual format: a recorded ASL version embedded as a YouTube video followed by a written English version. Responders had the option to respond in written English, in recorded ASL, or by requesting a Zoom session to respond in ASL or English over video. Instructions and outside resources were provided bilingually in ASL and written English to demonstrate how to record and share ASL videos via YouTube, DropBox, and other online file sharing systems.

In total, the 279 emails were sent to survey recipients. The email introduced the intention of the needs assessment, IRIS Project history, how the data was to be used, how long the survey was expected to take, and a link to the survey. Two reminder emails were sent to non-responders.

Survey recipients were selected based on their affiliation with state commissions for the deaf and hard of hearing, interpreting organizations, residential and day schools for the deaf, IEPs, RID national and state affiliate chapters, deaf clubs and organizations, K12 and college/university access offices, and/or vocational rehabilitation counselors for the deaf. The email distribution list cast a geographically wide net, particularly in the thirteen target states identified by the IRIS Project team as high priority based on U.S. census data indicating large rural populations, disparate statewide interpreter certification rates compared to national rates, and the lack of a baccalaureate IEP program. The target states were grouped in three noncontiguous areas of the United States per grant requirements: the northeast (Maine, New Hampshire, & Vermont), the southeast (Alabama, Louisiana, & Mississippi), and the intermountain west (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Washington, & Wyoming). Recipients were invited to share the survey with folks in their networks who the initial outreach efforts may have missed.

Respondents were asked to self-disclose the following identifying and demographic information: name; state; email; social identity (Deaf, DeafBlind, Hard of Hearing, Coda, and hearing); and area of expertise. Demographic information about age, education, ethnicity, gender identity, income, and race was not requested. Responses on all demographic items were optional.

## **Results**

Of the 279 emails sent, 103 individuals actively engaged with the survey by answering at least one item (36.92%). The team suspected that one of the primary reasons for the low engagement rate may have been the distribution timing, as most of the non-responders were contacted through their K12 or college/ university email addresses during a time when many educators, faculty, and school staff were on winter break. Completed responses were submitted by 71 individuals (68.93%). There were no requests for synchronous survey administrations, and all survey items were submitted in written English.

The responses represented a wide swath of the United States, particularly among the 13 states in the grant's three target regions. Completed responses were received from the following 16 states: three from Alaska (4.23%), one from Alabama (1.41%), one from Arkansas (1.41%), two from Colorado (2.82%), one from Georgia (1.41%), one from Maryland (1.41%), two from Maine (2.82%), 13 from Mississippi (18.3%), one from North Dakota (1.41%), five from New Hampshire (7.04%), three from Nevada (4.23%), three from Oregon (4.23%), one from Texas (1.41%), 13 from Vermont (18.3%), 8 from Washington State (11.26%), and 8 from Wyoming (11.26%). Five respondents did not disclose their location (7.04%%). Of the responders who provided their location, 52 reported living in one of the 3 target regions (78.79%): 22 in the intermountain west (33.33%), 20 in the Northeast (30.30%), and 14 in the Southeast (21.21%).

Overall, IRIS's three target regions were well represented, though the percentage of responses were lower in the Southeast than the other two regions, perhaps because the members of the IRIS team reside in the Intermountain West and Northeast (Washington State, Colorado, and Vermont) and have fewer professional connections in the Southeast. However, the majority of the total responses came from the three target regions (79%), affording the surveyors a glimpse at the perceptions of the stakeholders most closely impacted by the realities of rural interpreter training in the areas where IRIS proposed to focus its efforts.

Stakeholders self-identified as follows: 7 were Deaf (9.86%), none were DeafBlind (0.00%), 7 were Hard of Hearing (9.86%), 49 were hearing (69.01%), and 8 were Coda (11.27%). Percentages of Coda and Hard of Hearing responders tracked the overall percentages of survey recipients who represent these social identities, including those who did not respond; deaf individuals were underrepresented; and hearing individuals were overrepresented.

The item surveying respondents' areas of expertise prompted them to select all options that applied to them. Of the 71 respondents, 132 areas of expertise were identified. Fifty-three respondents (76.06%) selected 'interpreter' as one of their areas of expertise, and two clarified their roles further in the 'other' text box ('educational interpreter' and 'rural interpreter'). The next most selected category was 'interpreter educator' (17, 12.88%) followed by 'administrator' (14, 10.61%). Seven respondents (5.3%) identified as consumers of interpreting services.

***Question 1: In your opinion, what are the three biggest challenges for a rural interpreter working today?***

Professional isolation was a consistent theme in this section. Rural interpreters had limited opportunities to network with or work alongside interpreting colleagues or interact with deaf adults. One respondent observed, "many rural interpreters in our state were "recruited"

(oftentimes not voluntarily) from other positions within the school system when a DHH<sup>2</sup> student enrolled. Positions such as cafeteria worker, classroom aide, janitor being some of the ones we have heard of in our state. Several of the "interpreters" started "interpreting" knowing just their ABC, numbers and a handful of signs from a book. Very common here. Many have never met a deaf adult and have only learned signs from books/internet” (Hardesty & Decker, 2021).

Socioeconomic forces also pose significant challenges including job instability, low pay, lack of perceived professional status, and transportation issues coupled with limited access to local, specialized rural training.

***Question 2: What gaps do you see in training for interpreters in rural areas?***

The most common gaps respondents noted in interpreter training were exposure to a vibrant professional community, diverse deaf individuals, a wide variety of interpreting settings, Deaf culture, rich language models, cultural diversity in general, and formal training. One respondent stated, “For a gap you need two sides. There are no training programs, so we don't even have a gap!” (Hardesty & Decker, 2021).

Responses indicated that rural interpreters must travel outside of their rural areas to participate in classes or workshops designed and delivered in urban settings for urban interpreters. A respondent exclaimed, in all caps, “OFFER THEM IN THE RURAL COMMUNITIES, WHERE WE ARE IT IS SEVERAL HOURS TO THE CLOSEST TRAININGS AND WORKSHOPS AND MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE FINANCIALLY” (Hardesty & Decker, 2021). Beyond the significant barriers created by the distance and expense of traveling to receive training outside of their home communities, stakeholders also observed that rural interpreters avoid training due to a lack of licensure, confidence, and/or skill, all of which contribute to the many opportunities to find new approaches to rural interpreter training.

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<sup>2</sup> Deaf/ Hard of Hearing



***Question 3: What opportunities do you see to improve training for interpreters in rural areas?***

A prominent theme in the realm of opportunity was the untapped potential perceived in rural interpreting training. Potential was noted not only in the skills and abilities of existing practitioners, but also in students and novices. Stakeholders recognize that there were not enough rural interpreters, and the opportunity was there to increase the number of skilled interpreters through access to training. Relatedly, there was untapped potential to bring in workshops, targeted mentoring, and education to rural interpreters where they live and work, rather than expecting interpreters to go where the educational programming is offered, particularly if it does not fit their specialized needs. This led to a third area of commonly perceived potential: the use of remote technology to increase access to training and mentorship and, relatedly, “opportunities for more stable and reliable internet for interpreters in rural areas” (Hardesty & Decker, 2021).

**Discussion**

Stakeholders recognized there are great gaps and challenges in interpreter training. However, they also predicted that they are not insurmountable, and there also exist great opportunities to address barriers with creative solutions and new approaches to training. For example, online interpreter education was identified as both an opportunity and a challenge depending on rural interpreters’ access to technology. Capitalizing on this duality by creating organizational partnerships with spaces and places where interpreters already are (i.e., schools, community colleges, vocational rehabilitation and other state offices, hospitals, courts, etc.), programs like IRIS could potentially facilitate equitable access to existing Wi-Fi networks, thereby addressing a persistent systemic barrier. In turn, established networks between rural organizations and local interpreters could become a lifeline to online interpreter education access and online work opportunities beyond the life of the grant project.

Another throughline that spanned both opportunities and barriers was the lack of exposure that rural interpreters have to the many facets of professional interpreting including connections to a diverse Deaf community, varied language (both signed and spoken), and collegial relationships with peers and mentors. Though it was not explicitly stated, exposure to diversity extends well beyond Deaf culture and signed language models to include the vibrancy and richness of gender identity and expression, race, ethnicity, ability, lived experience, and intersectional representation. The field of interpreting is largely made up of white, hearing, heterosexual, cisgender women who live and work in urban areas, which is often reflected by IEP faculty members. Rural interpreters, BIPOC, cisgender male, transgender, LGBTQ+, Deaf<sup>3</sup>, and Coda<sup>4</sup> interpreters report that their educational needs are not well met by traditional IEPs (Sheneman & Robinson, 2020; West Oyedele, 2015; Williamson, 2016).

Rural interpreters' need for collegial relationships, professional engagement, education, and quality mentoring became the theoretical foundation for IRIS's RIPPLE (Rural Interpreters Promoting Professional Learning and Engagement) program, which identified and trained rural interpreters from diverse backgrounds to facilitate and mentor IRIS's rural interpreter training in intentional Communities of Learning. The results of this needs assessment constituted both a roadmap and a call to action to continue to engage with rural stakeholders and interpreters; critically examine the gaps, challenges, and opportunities that exist; and make positive steps toward actively changing the frame and approach of rural interpreter training.

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<sup>3</sup> Deaf interpreters are considered cultural and linguistic specialists so they are described with the word 'Deaf' with a capitalized D.

<sup>4</sup> Codas are individuals (deaf or non-deaf) who were raised by at least one signing, deaf parent

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