

Conference Guidelines for Deaf/HH Accessibility

Note on use: This document attempts to give general and concise recommendations for accessibility and accommodations for Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) attendees at conferences or similar large events. It includes only limited recommendations for DeafBlind attendees and does not address the needs of attendees with other disabilities. **The overarching advice is to ask attendees for their preferred accommodations;** one size does not fit all. When in doubt, ask the attendees or contact the organizations in the Additional Resources section.

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Conferences & ADA Accommodations

NAD Letter on Legal Accommodations at Conferences:

<https://www.nad.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Conferences-Conventions-and-Workshops.pdf>

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) spells out in detail the responsibilities to fulfill accommodation requests.

Some important take home points for providing accommodations are as follows:

- 1) It is the responsibility of the conference hosting entity to find, schedule, and pay for the chosen accommodation for each meeting attendee who makes such requests. **Please see NAD letter item 2.**
- 2) The provider (ASL interpreter/Real-time Captionist) of the accommodation must be qualified (certified or documented trained professional). Typing fast does NOT make a person eligible to be assigned as a captionist. **Please see NAD letter item 3.**
- 3) The conference organization may NOT require the individual requesting accommodations to pay for provision of these services. **Please see NAD letter item 4.**
- 4) When using Zoom, it is the Zoom Host's responsibility to assign the qualified captionist to type captions during live Zoom conference events. Attendees at Zoom meetings do not have Zoom app privilege to assign anyone to act as captionist.
- 5) Be sure to clearly identify the client's preference for accommodations. If a number of accommodation requests are made from different DHH individuals, the conference host must accommodate each person's preferred service (e.g.: ASL interpreter, real-time captioning). It is **not** acceptable to ask all DHH attendees at conferences to attend the same session as a way to reduce expenses. **Please see NAD letter item 5.**

Additional Resources

Designing Accessible Events for People with Disabilities and Deaf Individuals

<https://www.vera.org/publications/designing-accessible-events-for-people-with-disabilities-and-deaf-individuals>

Working with Sign Language Interpreters for Events

https://www.vera.org/downloads/Publications/designing-accessible-events-for-people-with-disabilities-and-deaf-individuals/legacy_downloads/working-with-sign-language-interpreters-events.pdf

Coordinating Interpreters for Conferences

<https://asnwonline.com/coordinating-interpreters-for-conferences/>

Webinar Accessibility for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People

<https://www.deafhhtech.org/rerc/webinar-accessibility-for-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-people/>

National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (general resources)

<https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/resources>

W3C Accessibility of Remote Meetings

<https://www.w3.org/TR/remote-meetings/>

1. In a virtual setting

Accessibility of the virtual platform

Arrangement and customization of live meetings

- Ideally, attendees should be able to pin/maximize specific participant windows, rearrange participant windows, and hide participants with video off.
- If attendees don't have the ability to rearrange and resize the video window of the interpreter, then the interpreter's video should be pinned or spotlighted so that they are large enough to see clearly. The interpreters can manage their own spotlighting if they can be given permission (e.g., assigned as co-hosts in Zoom).
- Attendees should be able to change font size, color, and placement of captions. (Both live and on the recording.) If this is not possible within the platform, it is helpful to provide attendees with a link to view the captions in a separate window that offers more visual customization options.
- Captions should be "chunked" into phrases so that captions are displayed on only 2-3 lines at a time to ensure legibility.
- Attendees should be able to see the presentation slides, presenter, interpreter, and captions simultaneously in the same window. Both presenters and attendees should be able to see interpreters and captions.
- Other visual customization settings are also helpful (e.g., font, colors, light/dark modes).
- Slides that are shared during a presentation should be made available separately upon request. This allows attendees to arrange the windows as they prefer and allows the use of screen-reading software for attendees who are blind/low-vision.

Ensuring interpreter can join if meeting is full

- If there is a cap on the number of participants in a session, there should be some way of ensuring that both the interpreter and the DHH attendee can join the session together.

Blind and low-vision accessibility

- For people who are blind/low-vision, the conference platform and materials should be accessible via a screenreader. This includes the platform navigation, sidebar chat, agenda, and all other components. The platform should comply with [Website Content Accessibility Guidelines](#).
- Visual customization options should be easy to find, and/or it should be easy to contact tech support for assistance.
- There are other best practices for full accessibility for people who are blind/low-vision; for example, requiring presenters to give visual descriptions during presentations and ensuring that all materials are screenreader-accessible. (This can be checked using the "check accessibility" feature in MS Office.)

Captioning

- Captioning is not only beneficial for DHH people, but also for people whose first language is not English, people with disabilities, people in noisy environments, and

people who are losing their hearing due to age or other causes.

- Pre-recorded presentations should have captioning or, at minimum, a transcript.
- All conference videos and media should be captioned. Presenters should be encouraged to use captioned media in their presentations.
- Automatic speech-to-text captioning is generally insufficient and has many errors, especially for discipline-specific terminology. Although some attendees may be able to use automatic captioning, live captioning by a human is preferred.

Exhibitors and poster sessions

- For low-vision access, poster presenters should include a written description of visual elements of their poster.
- Exhibitors and sponsors should be encouraged or required to make their materials accessible, meaning that all videos should be captioned and all materials should be accessible via a screenreader.

Before the virtual conference

Program and session pre-selections

- Be sure to check with DHH attendees about their specific access needs. Some attendees may use only captioning, only interpreting, or either depending on the type of session. Attendees may need more information about the format of a session to determine which access service would be the best fit.
- For attendees who use interpreters, an ideal approach is to assign two interpreters to every DHH attendee or to assign interpreters to all sessions. This allows the attendee flexibility to attend any session or spontaneously move to a different session if they want.
- If there are many concurrent sessions, it may be appropriate to ask DHH attendees to pre-select which sessions they plan to attend (and which access service for each).
- The earlier the conference schedule or pre-selected schedule can be sent to the interpreting or captioning agency, the better. The agency should have the final request schedule at least 2-3 weeks before the conference starts.
- There should be leeway for last-minute, unexpected changes (especially for attendees to join sessions that they couldn't have known about sooner, like exhibitor events).
- Be mindful that DHH presenters may want to use specific interpreters, especially for their own presentations or networking events. It's helpful to confirm with the DHH presenter as soon as possible so they can arrange their preferred interpreters (if they want).

Pre-conference orientation/practice session

- Optional (but encouraged) orientation or practice session with all DHH **attendees** and interpreters.
- Mandatory orientation or practice session with DHH **presenters** and interpreters assigned to their presentation.
- The orientations should be scheduled in advance to give everyone time to adjust their schedules if needed to join. This gives everyone a chance to meet each other, identify any barriers, and develop workarounds before the conference (or presentation) starts.
- All attendees should have access to the conference platform ahead of time so that they can adjust settings and see how to navigate it before the conference starts.

Contact with interpreters

- Interpreters should have access to each other's emails and phone numbers. Interpreters should get the full schedule of assignments several days before the conference.
- DHH attendees should have contact information for all interpreters (email at minimum and preferably phone number). DHH attendees should also get the full schedule of assignments several days before the conference.
- If possible, external interpreters should be introduced to the agency coordinator and/or interpreter point person before the conference; this may include interpreters who were brought by a DHH attendee or are provided by a different entity than the main agency.

Appropriate setup and qualifications for interpreters

- All interpreters should follow standard best practices of wearing professional, skin color-contrasting clothing; having a plain, skin color-contrasting background with no distractions; and having reliable, high-speed internet access.
- All interpreters should have background in interpreting at research conferences and experience working in higher education.
- Generally, teams of two interpreters should be assigned to sessions that last one hour or longer. There are exceptions, and the interpreting agency should be able to advise.

During the virtual conference

Point of contact person for attendees with access services problems

- If attendees have an urgent issue with captioning or interpreting, they should be able to contact someone who can help remedy the situation immediately by contacting the session's tech support person and/or the assigned service provider(s). For example: An interpreter freezing, severe captioning errors, or an assigned service provider is absent.
- There should also be a contact person for attendees or service providers to report problems with specific interpreters or captionists; e.g., if a service provider is unqualified.

Point of contact person for interpreters and captionists with urgent problems

- If interpreters or captionists have an urgent issue, they should be able to contact someone who can help remedy the situation immediately. For example: a team interpreter doesn't show up for a session they're assigned to, or an interpreter/captionist has technical issues that prevent them from working.

Last-minute requests during the conference

- There should be some procedure for attendees to make last-minute requests for events that they couldn't have known about earlier, such as exhibitor events.
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2. In a face-to-face setting

Accessibility of the physical layout

Reserved areas for interpreters and DHH attendees

- There should be a reserved area for the interpreter (with a chair) at the front of the room, as close to the speaker podium and presentation as possible.
- Because interpreters work in teams most of the time, there should also be one reserved seat for the second interpreter in the audience, near the working interpreter's area. The two interpreters need to have visual contact to support each other and a clear space to physically switch positions during the presentation.
- There should be several reserved chairs for DHH audience members to have a clear line of sight to see the interpreter, presenter, and presentation.

Live captioning

- For large plenaries and keynotes, it's preferable to have live captioning on the monitors showing the presenter and/or presentation slides.
- If attendees will need to use their own devices to view captioning, please give advanced notice so that attendees can make arrangements.

General accessibility

- The conference venue should be generally accessible, including access for people using wheelchairs and setting up spaces in a way that is easy for blind/low-vision individuals to navigate (e.g., avoid running cords in the middle of walkways). The conference hotel should have ADA-compliant rooms.

Before the face-to-face conference

Program and session pre-selections

- Be sure to check with DHH attendees about their specific access needs. Some attendees may use only captioning, only interpreting, or either depending on the type of session. Attendees may need more information about the format of a session to determine which access service would be the best fit.
- Some attendees may have additional needs; for example, a DeafBlind person may need interpretation at close visual range, which may require a second team of interpreters and additional reserved space in the front of the room. An attendee with a service dog may need reserved space at the end of the row to accommodate their dog.
- For attendees who use interpreters, an ideal approach is to assign two interpreters to every DHH attendee or to assign interpreters to all sessions. This allows the attendee flexibility to attend any session or spontaneously move to a different session if they want.
- If there are many concurrent sessions, it may be appropriate to ask DHH attendees to pre-select which sessions they plan to attend (and which type of access services).
- The earlier the conference schedule or pre-selected schedule can be sent to the interpreting or captioning agency, the better. The agency should have the final request schedule at least 2-3 weeks before the conference starts.
- There should be leeway for last-minute, unexpected changes (especially for attendees to

join sessions that they couldn't have known about sooner, like exhibitor events).

- Be mindful that DHH presenters may want to use specific interpreters, especially for their own presentations or networking events. It's helpful to confirm with the DHH presenter as soon as possible so they can arrange their preferred interpreters (if they want).
- DHH presenters should be in touch with the interpreters assigned to their presentation ahead of time.

Floating/flexible interpreters

- There should always be at least one interpreter available to accompany DHH attendees for drop-in events such as exhibitor halls, poster sessions, networking areas, and similar. If there are several DHH attendees who could spontaneously attend these events, there should be several floating interpreters available.

Contact between interpreters

- Interpreters should have access to each other's emails and phone numbers. Interpreters should get the full schedule of assignments several days before the conference.
- DHH attendees should have contact information for all interpreters (email at minimum and preferably phone number). DHH attendees should also get the full schedule of assignments several days before the conference.

Pre-conference orientation

- It is helpful to have a short meeting (5-10 minutes) to introduce all DHH attendees to interpreters and on-site access service providers. This makes it easier for DHH attendees to identify their assigned interpreters (and vice versa) and it's helpful to make sure that all interpreters have met each other and can arrange to preconference about teamed assignments during the conference.

Technical needs

- If the interpreter is on stage with the presenter, it may be difficult to hear so it may be helpful to place the interpreter near a speaker/monitor (if one is already set up) or allow them to use headphones with a portable monitor.
- If the presenter is using sign language and the interpreter is working into spoken English, the interpreter will need to have the microphone (if applicable) and be positioned to see the speaker clearly.

Qualifications of interpreters

- All interpreters should have background in interpreting at research conferences, minimum educational requirements, and experience working with higher education.
- Generally, teams of two interpreters should be assigned to sessions that last one hour or longer. There are exceptions, and the interpreting agency should be able to advise.

During the face-to-face conference

Point person for attendees with access services problems

- If attendees have an urgent issue with captioning or interpreting, they should be able to contact someone on-site who can help remedy the situation immediately by working with the assigned service provider(s).

- There should also be a contact person for attendees or service providers to report problems with specific interpreters or captionists. For example, if an interpreter is unqualified.

Point person for interpreters and captionists with urgent problems

- If interpreters or captionists have an urgent issue, they should be able to contact someone on-site who can help remedy the situation immediately. For example: A team interpreter doesn't show up for a session they're assigned to.

Space for access service providers and DHH attendees

- Especially at larger conferences, it is helpful to have a room or area that can serve as "access services headquarters." This makes it easy for DHH attendees to find floating interpreters or find interpreters for upcoming sessions that they may want to discuss in advance. The contact person for access services problems could work from here. This could also be a "quiet" space for DHH attendees who need a break.
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3. After the conference (both virtual and face-to-face)

Debrief with stakeholders

- A short survey should be sent to DHH attendees to ask about their experiences and feedback with access services.
- The conference organizer should debrief with attendees, access services coordinators, the interpreting agency, access service providers, and/or other stakeholders, preferably within several weeks after the conference ends.