



Video Relay Services

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Interpreting in the Video Relay Services Environment

Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this position paper is to provide general information about interpreting in the video relay services (VRS) environment and to outline recommendations for working conditions, policies and procedures. In addition, this document highlights professional practices that promote the health and wellbeing of video relay interpreters (VIs) providing services in Canada, subsequently leading to effective and sustainable quality interpreting services.

Creating this Document

The content of this document is based on the following:

- experiential anecdotes of working video relay interpreters,
- results from a 2016 membership survey,
- academic research of the video relay services (VRS) environment, and
- a review of other relevant publications and resources.

As with other position papers that CASLI produces, a series of Reading Circles were used to gather feedback on the content and readability. This is a living document that will be amended and revised as new information comes to light.

Terminology

In the literature, Deaf, deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing video relay users are referred to using several different terms, for example, sign language users / callers, or deaf and hard of hearing users / callers. For this document, for the sake of readability, we will use the term “deaf callers” as the overarching reference for all VRS users who access the call using video. Those callers using audio to connect will be referred to as “hearing callers.”

Introduction to Video Relay Services

The first video relay services were established in Sweden in 1997 (Hellstrom, 1998). In 2000, the United States began to provide VRS in American Sign Language (ASL), English and Spanish. In late 2016, SRV Canada VRS was established and provides interpreting services in ASL – English, and langue des signes québécoise (LSQ) – French.

The Canadian Radio and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC), the federal regulator of video relay services in Canada, describes VRS as a: basic telecommunications service that enables (deaf) people who use sign language and (hearing) telephone users to communicate. The deaf caller connects to a VRS interpreter operator using Internet-based videoconferencing programs. The hearing caller connects to the VRS interpreter through conventional phone services.

Regardless of who is initiating the call, the interpreter is able to connect the line through to the other party and interprets the conversation¹. Napier et al (2018) describe VRS calls as “hybrid-media calls, whereby videoconferencing technology is used between the deaf caller and interpreter, while the hearing caller has no access to visual information and is expected to treat the call like any other telephone conversation.” In Canada, VRS is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is free for registered Canadian users making calls within North America.

¹ <https://crtc.gc.ca/eng/phone/acces/rela.htm> accessed May 2019

The VRS Environment

Video interpreters (VIs) interpret a diverse spectrum of calls, ranging from everyday conversations and common business transactions to tragic and emotionally charged events. The communication register of the interaction can range from frozen forms of audiotaped standardized texts, to formal interactions with overt power imbalances, to intimate exchanges.

Interpreters encounter a range of unique challenges, notably:

- the quick pace at which calls are processed,
- limited or no prior knowledge of callers and call content, and
- the variety, length and topics of calls.

In addition, VIs serve deaf callers with emerging fluency in ASL or LSQ² with variable fluency in the official written languages of their region (English or French). As well, hearing callers may have emerging fluency in the official spoken languages (English or French) of their region, and accents or dialects unfamiliar to the interpreter. Callers are of all ages, from young children to the elderly, which naturally influences vocabulary choices and discourse style.

Callers are from all regions of Canada, and as such, may use local terminology in both the signed and spoken languages specific to their area. In addition, deaf callers have varying degrees of familiarity with telecommunications norms of behaviour, and hearing callers have varying degrees of familiarity working through VRS and the interpreting process to interact with their deaf callers.

The VI's role is to handle the interaction between callers and strive to keep both parties engaged in a natural flow of communication. As Taylor (2005) notes, interpreters must integrate, to the best of their ability, everything they see in sign language into their spoken interpretation and more specifically into their voice production using prosodic markers, intonation and repetitions to create flow and maintain the floor. This includes turn-taking behaviours, backchanneling feedback, voiced pauses, pausing, and silence that are typical and expected by non-deaf callers (p. 15). The role also includes customer service responsibilities while engaging with the callers (p. 17).

The *Handbook of Remote Interpreting* (2015) references Wadensjö's (2003 [1993]) work where she explains that a dialogue interpreter's role is not only that of a *relayer*, reporting the message from one party to the other, but also that of *gatekeeper* or *coordinator* of the interaction, contributing, together with the speakers, the management of turns and of communication. Interpreter gatekeeping can also include giving or denying access to the floor or to information content (p. 13).

During a VRS call, a number of distracting factors may impact the interpreter's ability to concentrate or to perceive the source language. Deaf callers are often calling from their homes, where multiple visual distractions can be present, for example, movement from children, pets, or others in the room. Lighting from windows or lamps (or lack thereof) can make it difficult to see the caller. The clothing choices (or lack thereof) of the deaf caller, as well as background items in the home, can impede the VI's concentration. Deaf callers may be connecting from their cars (not while driving), which can restrict the caller's signing space. Alternatively, they may be calling from any setting in the community, which, too, can present visual distractions in the background. If the deaf caller is signing with one hand and holding the device with the other, which in itself presents challenges to understanding, the movement of the device is often unsteady and the motion can significantly impact comprehension. There can also be audio distractions in the background of the hearing caller's environment (e.g. music, other voices, traffic, children crying, dogs barking).

² CASLI wishes to acknowledge there are other signed languages used in Canada such as Maritime Sign Language, Inuit and Aboriginal Sign Languages.

Additionally, the connection quality of the video or audio channel may be distorted or choppy, adding to the difficulty of perceiving the source language. All of these interfering environmental distractions or disturbances impact the VI's ability to interpret. Therefore, robust strategies must be developed to respond to these challenging demands.

Interpreting telephone conversations in a call centre environment means negotiating a number of technical tasks. Specifically, VRS requires computers, secure high-speed Internet connections and specialized audio-video software to process calls. The VI is typically working in a cubicle at a desk, using supplementary text-based aids such as whiteboards, markers, paper and pen, etc. to help with remembering numbers and names that occur during the call. The VI must manage headsets and volume controls while connected to the hearing caller, as well as manage the video of the deaf caller on the computer screen. Interpreters must also manage voice carry over (VCO) calls where deaf callers speak for themselves and the interpreter signs the audio portion of the call.

Simultaneously, the interpreter may be using a chat box feature to relay information to, and receive information from the deaf caller, as well as attending to instant messaging to communicate in real-time with other VI colleagues or to receive instructions from team leaders. Depending on the call centres physical setup, if several VIs are working at the same time, there can be audio interference from other interpreters processing calls. Additional workplace factors that impact the interpreting environment are lighting quality and the configuration of enclosed spaces, which affects comfort and function.

Compared to working in the community or educational environments, video relay interpreters may be unable to properly prepare for the variety and intensity of each call's content, increasing the mental and cognitive demands of the interpreting task (Moser-Mercer, 2003). There are inherent challenges for VIs because they lack a shared frame of reference with the callers (Rosenberg, 2007). Research shows that working remotely within a call centre environment presents particular challenges for the interpreter. Expectations include functioning at the same level as an onsite interpreter with less preparation, less control over which assignments (calls) to accept, greater diversity of callers, and greater diversity of topics / genres (Napier, Skinner, Braun, 2018).

Research in spoken language conference settings using video remote technology shows that a lack of relevant contextual information, normally available during on-site interpreting settings, forces the interpreter to resort to guesswork and to exert more energy in cognitive processing and self-monitoring (Chernov, 2004). This finding has been shown to apply to sign language remote interpreting³ as well (Braun, 2007).

Community, educational, and video remote interpreters have better opportunities to collect preparatory materials, receive more breaks between assignments, and to manage the interpreting environment to achieve the best possible quality of service. In the VRS environment, VIs do have strategies to manage the interpreting environment, but within the service model of processing calls as defined by the VRS employer and the government regulator of the service. As a result, interpreters are constantly balancing service demands with how to sufficiently rest and recover between calls to alleviate the physical and cognitive demands of working in this stationary but spontaneous environment.

³ Using video and Internet technology, video remote interpreters (VRIs) interpret for situations where the deaf and hearing consumers are typically in the same location (e.g. staff meetings, interviews, training, appointments), but the interpreter is situated in a remote location. This is different from video relay services, which serves the telecommunication environment, and deaf and hearing callers are not (allowed to be) in the same location. CASLI is in the process of preparing a position paper on Video Remote Interpreting.

Canadian Labour Regulations

The Government of Canada stipulates that the standard hours for an employee working in federally regulated Canadian industries are:

- up to eight hours in a day (any period of 24 consecutive hours),
- up to 40 hours in a week (the period between midnight on Saturday and midnight on the Saturday that immediately follows),
- entitlement to one full day of rest each week, and
- during a week when one or more holidays occur, the standard hours of work are reduced by up to eight hours for each holiday.

In addition, employees have the right to:

- be informed of known or foreseeable risks in the workplace and be provided with the information, instructions, training and supervision necessary to protect their health and safety;
- refuse to work if there is reasonable cause to believe that the workplace, or the performance of an activity, constitutes a danger to the health and safety of employees;
- have access to government or employer reports related to the health and safety of employees through a workplace health and safety committee or representative, and
- participate in identifying and correcting work-related health and safety concerns.

It should be noted that interpreters may work as ‘contractors’ or be designated as ‘self-employed’ in the VRS setting. As such, they are not considered ‘employees’ as defined by the Canada Revenue Agency, and are therefore not subject to the labour regulations set out above. However, CASLI recommends that these regulations function as a reasonable guideline for all VIs regardless of employment status.

Occupational Health and Safety

Each province and territory has its own legislation and regulations regarding working conditions and occupational health and safety. These regulations state that both the employer and worker have a dual responsibility to ensure occupational health and safety in the workplace. Employer obligations may include providing regular training or educational sessions designed to prevent injury and promote a healthy workplace, as well as a duty to report and document accidents or injuries.

Occupational health researchers have long noted that self-employment and piece work (payment by units of work output produced) often lead to voluntary overwork. Similarly, self-employed workers not only have considerable incentive to work through illness and injury, and may not be inclined to limit the number of hours they choose to work in order to earn more income. In response, they may choose to work past the point of fatigue and expose themselves to injury or stress-related ill health. The self-employed interpreter should contact their territorial or provincial workers’ compensation board or commission to obtain information on voluntary or discretionary coverage, as an “employer by application” (Woodcock & Fischer 2008).

The incidence of Repetitive Strain Injuries among signed language interpreters is well known and documented in the literature. Injuries and related health concerns are the result of the complex interaction between situational factors, interpreter factors and biomechanical processes (elements of movement) involved in the task (Fischer, Marshall, Woodcock 2012). As indicated, the VRS environment poses unique challenges with increased complexity, duration and frequency of calls, ergonomically static positions, emotional labour and working alone. For these reasons it is paramount

that working conditions for VRS interpreters are designed, based on research and evidence, to promote physical, mental and psychological good health.

Recommended Working Conditions

CASLI recommends the following factors be reflected in the policies and processes of the VRS work environment and in the interpreter's professional practice:

1. Call preparation

Video relay interpreters should be permitted to collect critical information from callers prior to processing a call, in order to maximize message equivalency and to significantly increase the effectiveness of the interpretation as well as the efficiency of the call. Information can include, but is not limited to:

- call type (e.g. family, friend, medical, legal, bank, government department, service agency, conference call, interview, emergency);
- call purpose (e.g. making an appointment, resolving billing issue with a company, ordering a product, making a complaint, information gathering, social conversation);
- characteristics of the deaf caller (e.g. signing style, sign language fluency, deafblind);
- characteristics of the hearing caller (e.g. accents, speech pace, spoken language fluency);
- characteristics of the dyadic relationship (e.g. register, power balance);
- potential length of call (e.g. lengthy hold, 30 minute meeting, brief inquiry, leaving a message, unknown); and
- regional elements (e.g. geographic and locale-specific names, regional vocabulary).

After collecting sufficient information, the interpreter becomes better equipped to determine whether a teamer—another VI or Deaf interpreter—is necessary, or whether to accept or decline (transfer) the call. The need for a teamer can change at any point throughout a call, and the primary interpreter should have the ability to request or release a team member as the characteristics of the call change.

The content of some telephone calls rarely occur in face-to-face community assignments. For example: tracking a parcel, ordering merchandise, accessing bank or company customer services, registering for programs, interacting with government departments at various levels, etc. It is important that video relay interpreters be familiar with the format and delivery of such consumer services. To this end, VRS employers can support the quality of services by sharing information with VIs about emerging trends or major marketing promotions (e.g. between certain dates cellular company X is offering a 10 GB data plan for \$60/mo.) so the interpreters can be prepared for calls relating to these topics.

VRS interpreters serve large and diverse populations. As such, national and international news/events in the world and in the Deaf communities are common topics in telephone conversations. It is incumbent upon the interpreter to be well informed and prepared.

2. Team interpreting

Team interpreting is a common strategy to address the physical, emotional and cognitive demands of interpreted assignments. It effectively reduces the frequency and duration of movement, the cognitive load and creates a collaborative environment. Video relay interpreters should have the autonomy to determine when a team member is warranted, and have access to colleagues who can readily respond to a team request. Typical examples for working in a team include: emergencies, conference call meetings, lengthy calls, technical content, hearing callers with unfamiliar accents, emotionally charged content, and poor audio or video connections. Deaf interpreters

should also be available to work with VIs to better serve callers. As a matter of good practice, teamed calls should be debriefed immediately after the conclusion of the call.

Deaf interpreters may be requested to team for any call, including those listed above, but they can be particularly effective when working with deaf callers who use unique regional sign dialects, foreign sign languages, have emerging sign language skills, have non-standard signs or signing styles (e.g. caller with cerebral palsy).

As described in the *AVLIC Official Position Paper: Deaf Interpreter* (2015), Deaf interpreters use their expertise in their native sign language, along with visual representations and other communication strategies, to foster culturally and linguistically appropriate interpretations for Deaf consumers that hearing interpreters may not be able to provide.

For more guidance on how to maximize the effectiveness of working in a team, review Russell (2011) *Team Interpreting: Best Practices*.

3. Ergonomics

VRS workstations should have adjustable desks that allow interpreting from sitting and standing positions, offering VIs the ability to vary their posture to reduce static loading on the body as a result of remaining in one position. Ergonomically adjustable chairs, keyboards, monitors, cameras, footrests, and padded floor mats should be standard equipment for all stations.

Each cubicle should have adjustable lighting that is not too harsh for the interpreter, and sufficient enough for deaf callers to see the interpreter clearly on the video. The cubicle should have a reasonable amount of desk and floor space for interpreters to work comfortably, including enough space for an additional team member to sit in the cubicle to provide support during a call.

Noise interference from other VIs processing calls can affect the interpreter's ability to concentrate, thereby elevating stress levels and impacting interpreting quality. Noise-cancelling white-noise devices, sound barriers between workstations and high quality headsets can mitigate unwanted extraneous audio interference.

The *AVLIC Occupational Health and Safety Guide for Sign Language Interpreters* (Woodcock & Fischer, 2008) provides extensive information regarding health risks and injury prevention for interpreters, including important tips regarding sitting, posture, exercises and strategies to avoid tissue compression stresses. This document also provides a template for a health and safety policy, which we encourage employers to use and expand upon.

4. Work and rest periods

Research on work-rest ratios is inconclusive at this time (Fisher, Marshall, Woodcock 2012). The interplay is multi-faceted, requiring further exploration to ensure safe, risk-reduction practices are implemented, as they are known. At this time, CASLI recommends a minimum 10-minute break for every 60 minutes scheduled online, with a minimum 30-minute meal break for shifts greater than five hours, and a second 30 minute meal break should the shift extend beyond ten hours. Mini-breaks should be given as requested by interpreters in order to attend to changing needs during a shift. All breaks should be paid. Upon completion of a VRS call, a minimum of 30 seconds should elapse before the next call is received. Sufficient rest will help with concentration, alertness and energy. Insufficient rest will lead to fatigue and increased errors.

Regardless of the rest schedule of a shift, some calls may warrant an immediate break at their conclusion, such as 911 or other emergency calls, emotionally charged calls, or calls whose length, content or characteristics the interpreter found particularly challenging. Therefore, interpreters should be able to use their discretion to request additional offline time to recover physically, mentally and emotionally from demanding calls, including the option to debrief with a colleague during the break.

During breaks, interpreters should be able to leave their workstation and rest in a comfortably furnished common room, or to walk around, including outside the building. They should be able to snack and get beverages as needed.

5. Mental health and wellbeing

Research shows that some interpreters experience extreme levels of stress and burnout when working in video remote interpreting call centres (Bower, 2015; Wessling & Shaw, 2014). Video relay interpreters must be mindful of their emotional responses, and follow-through on self-care needs. CASLI recommends that VIs receive information and training pertaining to vicarious trauma and stress management, especially with respect to processing 911 and other emotionally charged calls. Awareness and recognition of both the physical and emotional changes resulting from cumulative stress and trauma is key to maintaining mental health and wellbeing. Whether through personal health insurance plans or employer benefit packages, access to free or low-cost counseling services (e.g. personal, financial, relationship, nutrition, physical fitness), should be accessible to VRS interpreters. These services are an important means of supporting and maintaining mental health, as well as to respond to signs of mental illness, or emotional or physical decline.

6. Interpreter qualifications

Companies that provide VRS should develop and implement specialized screening processes that mirror the environment and challenges of VRS interpreting, in order to determine the qualifications⁴ of new hires. CASLI recommends companies recruit interpreters with backgrounds that reflect the diversity of the Canadian population (e.g. disability, gender identity, race, religion).

To maintain the highest quality of interpreting, professionalism and cultural partnership, VRS providers serving Canada should employ sign language interpreters who are active members in good standing with CASLI. This ensures the interpreters are bound to the CASLI Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct, and are subject to its professional conduct review process. Beyond that, the Canadian legal, medical, social, governmental, etc. systems are different from other countries and non-Canadian interpreters will require additional training regarding Canadian systems, processes and institutions. A deep understanding of regional differences in Canadian usage of ASL and English / LSQ and French discourse styles and accompanying pragmatic knowledgeⁱ (see endnote) is necessary. Without this context and content knowledge the risk of interpreting errors increases dramatically.

Once a VI is hired, it is the VRS company's responsibility to offer ongoing job-specific training regarding policies, the use of technology, and the task management required to effectively process calls. In addition, providing professional development opportunities for VIs to enhance interpreting skills and knowledge should be incorporated into the employer's service model.

⁴ See Video Relay Service Interpreting Domains and Competencies (2007) and the Handbook of Remote Interpreting (2015).

7. Professional development

Professional development (PD) is a mutual responsibility of both the individual interpreter and VRS employers. VRS companies should offer training opportunities focused on the development of interpreting-specific skills, as well as advancing knowledge through theory or topic-specific educational activities. VRS providers are encouraged to coordinate and resource mentorship partnerships.

In keeping with the CASLI Code of Conduct and Guidelines for Professional Practice, interpreters should set out annual, as well as multi-year professional development plans with at least one stated objective (if not already achieved) to include passing the CASLI Certificate of Interpretation (COI). Setting aside time on a regular basis to review research, journals, articles, videos, books, web and pod casts, etc. will help maintain currency in the field. Establishing local or workplace-specific professional practice communities can deepen learning by gathering colleagues to discuss interpreting, cultural, social, workplace topics or trends.

Service Parity

CASLI recognizes the benefits of steady VRS employment in an environment that is known for its variety and flexible schedules. To ensure community-based services and video relay services are both adequately serviced, interpreters are encouraged to maintain a balance between both settings.

Conclusion

Video relay services makes it easier for all Canadians to stay connected through telecommunications in a fast-paced and technology-driven world. By enabling access to the telecommunications environment, the impact of VRS on deaf and hard of hearing Canadians who use sign language has been profound. As these video-based services expand, the demand for skilled sign language interpreters will continue to grow. The recommendations contained within, regarding policies, procedures and professional practice will help ensure the delivery of effective and quality interpreting services. This document also outlines for consumers the distinction between video relay, video remote, and on-site interpreting services to help inform their decisions regarding the appropriate service approach for their needs.

The need to maintain and strengthen communication and collaboration among service providers, consumers and interpreters continues. CASLI is committed to this objective, and to supporting the development of the profession of sign language interpreting in Canada.

More information on CASLI services, resources and membership can be found at www.casli.ca.

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Endnotes

ⁱ **Pragmatic knowledge** of language in a given context is demonstrated through one's functional and sociolinguistic knowledge. The Canadian Centre for Language Benchmarks (2012) document defines these competences in the following way:

Functional Knowledge is the ability to convey and interpret the communicative intent (or function) behind a sentence, utterance or text. It encompasses macro-functions of language use (e.g., transmission of information, social interaction and getting things done/persuading others, learning and thinking, creation and enjoyment), and micro-functions, or speech acts (e.g., requests, threats, warnings, pleas), and the conventions of use.

Sociolinguistic Knowledge is the ability to produce and understand utterances appropriately. It encompasses rules of politeness; sensitivity to register, dialect or variety; norms of stylistic appropriateness; sensitivity to "naturalness"; knowledge of idioms and figurative language; knowledge of culture, customs and institutions; knowledge of cultural references; and uses of language through interactional skills to establish and maintain social relationships.

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