What is a Sign Language Interpreter?

A sign language interpreter is someone who can interpret in sign language effectively, accurately and impartially, both receptively and expressively, using any necessary specialized vocabulary. To work as an interpreter in North Carolina, a person must be licensed. In applying for a license, the applicant must meet qualification standards required by the North Carolina Interpreter and Transliterator Licensure Law (N.C.G.S 90D). The Act lists situations where licensure does not apply.

A licensed sign language interpreter demonstrates proficient and ethical interpreting skills and has the knowledge and expertise required to function in a professional capacity. Interpreters work to ensure effective communication between individuals with who use sign language and those who don’t. They work in a variety of settings such as, but not limited to legal, medical, mental health, rehabilitation, education, social services, businesses, industries, government and performing arts. Interpreters may be self-employed (freelance) or work through an Interpreter Services Agency.

Interpreting requires intensive training and experience before proficient levels of skill are attained. If you are interested in becoming a sign language interpreter, learn about Interpreter Training Programs or Sign Language Studies in North Carolina by contacting DSDHH. Recommended course work may include, but not limited to, courses in Deaf culture, Deaf literature and folklore, elementary to advanced American Sign Language instruction, internship requirements and involvement with the local and state consumer organizations. To enhance knowledge and remain current with the profession, join a local, state and/or national interpreter organization.
How is a Sign Language Interpreter Different from a Signer?

Sign language interpreters and signers function in different settings, using language at a different pace with different content. Signers usually are present in natural, conversational settings, covering day-to-day topics such as chatting with friends who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing. Signers have control of their own intent, content, pace and message. Interpreters, on the other hand, work in situations where they can’t control the content of the message, but are trained to accurately convey another person’s message. The interpreter operates in an environment where terminology is much more advanced and unpredictable. The interpreter must keep up with the speaker, without knowing in advance what will be said. They must render the message faithfully, always conveying the content and the spirit of the speaker, using the language most readily understood by the person(s) they serve.

Often, people who have learned some sign language are incorrectly used as interpreters. A person who knows only conversational sign language does not possess the expertise required to perform effectively in the role of an interpreter.