DeafBlind Interpreting:

Focus Groups and Interviews

2018

DeafBlind Interpreting National Training and Resource Center

Regional Resource Center on Deafness

**Western Oregon University

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The DeafBlind Interpreting National Training and Resource Center is funded (2017 - 2021) by the US Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, CFDA #184.160D, Training of Interpreters Who Are Deaf and Individuals Who Are DeafBlind.

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# Overview

The materials presented here on interpreting with DeafBlind people are intended for interpreters and interpreter educators, as well as for DeafBlind people seeking resources on advocacy and working with interpreters. There is also information useful to researchers, interpreter coordinators, vocational rehabilitation specialists, and others seeking to increase their knowledge in this area.

This document is available in electronic format on the DBI website at [www.dbinterpreting.org](http://www.dbinterpreting.org). It can also be found in the DBI digital repository online at <http://digitalcommons.wou.edu/dbi>, and in the NCDB Library.

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# About DBI

  
In 2017, Western Oregon University’s Regional Resource Center on Deafness (RRCD) was awarded five-year federal funding to establish a national center on DeafBlind interpreting.

With a strong commitment to evidence-based practice, the DeafBlind Interpreting National Training and Resource Center (DBI) was established. The goal of the Center is *to enhance communication access for persons who are DeafBlind by increasing the number of interpreters able to effectively interpret utilizing tactile communication and other strategies.*

The Center’s corpus of work falls within two broad-based activities: (1) conduction of a training program and (2) provision of a resource center and repository for service providers, including interpreters, who seek information to better serve their constituents.

DBI is located on the Western Oregon University campus in Monmouth, 25 miles west of the Oregon School for the Deaf in the capital of Salem. For over 50 years, Western has been awarded funding to support pre-professionals in fields such as interpreter training, Deaf and hard of hearing education, and rehabilitation counseling. Grant awards from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) continue to support innovative educational programs and emerging research and practice in these fields.

**DBI Vision**

DBI envisions a world that celebrates the life and culture of DeafBlind persons, a world where DeafBlind people have influence and control over their destiny and dreams.

**DBI Mission**

The mission of DBI is to honor the diversity and range of communication preferences of DeafBlind individuals, or those who have a combination of vision and hearing loss, by increasing the range and number of culturally-competent and qualified interpreters and mentors.

# Acknowledgements

This document is part of a larger publication. A great many stakeholders contributed to *DeafBlind Interpreting: Toward Effective Practice,* both in content and preparation. They represent DeafBlind professionals and consumers, working Deaf and hearing interpreters, interpreter educators, vocational rehabilitation professionals, advocacy agency personnel, and others with a connection to DeafBlind individuals.

DBI gratefully acknowledges all who took the time for thoughtful engagement in the project’s interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Without their active participation, this report would not have been possible. In particular, we would like to acknowledge the following individuals:

* The project’s primary consultants for their insights, commitment and guidance in the project’s development and implementation**:** 
  + Jelica Nuccio
  + aj granda
* 2017-2021 Core Team Members for their role as project advisors:
  + Jelica Nuccio
  + aj granda
  + Roberto Cabrera
  + Jason Herbers
  + Rebecca Cowan-Story
  + Terra Edwards
* *Needs Assessment* designers, implementers, and synthesizers, for their direction and contributions to the gathering and analyzing of data:
  + Needs Assessment Development Team: CM Hall, Heather Holmes, Cheryl Davis
  + Annotated Bibliography: The National Task Force on DeafBlind Interpreting with collaboration from The National Center on Deaf-Blindness
  + Survey Design: CM Hall, Heather Holmes (DBI)  
    Evaluation Consultants: Sybille Guy & Patrick Aldrich of The Research Institute - Center on Research, Evaluation & Analysis
  + Focus Groups and Interview Facilitators: CM Hall & Heather Holmes (DBI), Roberto Cabrera, Ian Guzman Aranda, and Chad A. Ludwig
* Expert Reviewers who vetted the competencies for helping ensure the validity and integrity of the Domains and Competencies yielded by the data:
  + Rhonda Jacobs
  + Karen Petronio
  + Steven Collins
  + Roberto Cabrera
  + Rebecca Cowan-Story
  + Terra Edwards
  + Shelley Engstrom-Kestel
* Preparers of the publication for providing backbone to the Needs Assessment report:
  + Editors: CM Hall, Heather Holmes
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# Executive Summary

A major component of the DBI 2017 *Needs Assessment* was the use of focus groups and interviews to advance the identification of the competencies necessary to effectively interpret for DeafBlind individuals. To ensure a wide range of participation, and to address some of the systemic barriers to DeafBlind and Deaf people’s access to online survey tools in written English, focus groups and interviews were a means to invite participation, either in-person or via teleconference.

In total, 77 stakeholders participated in this *Needs Assessment* activity. Their responses supported the relevancy of the identified competencies but also revealed that the competencies were often not visible to interpreters working in this specialization. More specifically, the following competencies were confirmed. In most, but not call cases, the list below is listed in order of importance.

## Identified Competencies

1. Respect for DeafBlind individuals’ autonomy - making their own decisions.
2. An understanding of the different interpreting demands between visual ASL and tactile ASL (e.g., adding visual or audio description of the visual environment)
3. Knowledge of different types of communication options and techniques needed for tactile communication, and the ability to match an individual’s language preference (signed languages, close vision/tactile, haptics)
4. Fluency in ASL, TASL, and PTASL
5. Respect for diversity in the DeafBlind community
6. Knowledge and understanding of hearing loss and vision loss
7. Knowledge and understanding of accessibility and how to use various technologies (e.g., ALDs, visual description, orientation and mobility
8. Familiarity with vocational rehabilitation and its various settings/community partners (e.g., appointments, job shadowing, job coaching, on the job training, job interviews, career counseling)

# Methodology

The primary goal of the focus groups and interviews was to ascertain if the eight identified competencies established in the *Annotated Bibliography* and *Baseline Survey* resonated with stakeholders allied to DeafBlind individuals. To this end, stakeholders were asked to review each competency statement and share whether the competency was important to the stakeholder, and how often the stakeholder observed interpreters demonstrating the competency.

## Stakeholder Groups

Eight discrete stakeholder groups participated in a focus group or an interview. DBI staff took specific measures to solicit participation and feedback from each group. The stakeholder groups included the following:

* Deaf interpreters
* Interpreter educators (Deaf, DeafBlind or Hearing)
* Hearing interpreters
* DeafBlind individuals
* DeafBlind content experts (Hearing, Deaf, DeafBlind)
* DeafBlind advocacy agency personnel (Hearing, Deaf, DeafBlind)
* Vocational rehabilitation professionals who specialize with Deaf/DeafBlind clients
* Interpreter referral agencies

This range of stakeholders ensured that not only were the opinions of the practitioners considered, but also interpreter educators and content experts, and the DeafBlind people who use and hire their services. For purposes of recruitment, specific criteria were assigned to each stakeholder group (Table 1). It should be noted that despite targeted recruitment efforts, there was no representation from interpreter referral agencies in either the focus groups or interviews.

### Table 1: Stakeholder Definitions and Criteria for Participation in Focus Group or Interview Study

| **Stakeholder** | **Definition/Criteria** |
| --- | --- |
| DeafBlind Individual | A person who has a combined vision and hearing loss |
| DeafBlind Content Expert | A person who has expertise and experience working with individuals who are DeafBlind |
| Deaf Interpreter Educators | A person who is Deaf, deaf, or hard of hearing, who teaches and trains interpreters to work with DeafBlind individuals |
| Hearing Interpreters | A person who is hearing, who provides interpretation to DeafBlind individuals |
| Deaf Interpreters/Educators | An interpreter, or interpreter educator, who is Deaf, deaf, or hard of hearing, who provides interpretation to DeafBlind individuals |
| Hearing Interpreters/Educators | An interpreter, or interpreter educator, who is hearing, who provides interpretation to DeafBlind individuals |
| VR Counselor/Vendor/Interpreter | A professional who works in Vocational Rehabilitation and who experience working with DeafBlind consumers |
| DeafBlind Advocacy Agency Personnel | A person who works for an advocacy agency and who has experience advising on provision of interpreters for DeafBlind individuals |

## Focus Groups

The great advantage to conducting focus groups as a qualitative research method is the ability to garner more in-depth insights into the competencies as based on the feelings and experiences of the participants. Moreover, they provide a mechanism for participants to discuss a larger range of issues that cannot be fully captured by a questionnaire. DBI staff recognize that success in this research genre is largely dependent on the ability of participants to communicate openly and freely, and to do this they must feel they are in a safe environment (Edmunds, 1999). Use of focus groups and interviews was important because the primary survey instrument was conducted online in written English, a tool widely recognized as restrictive for Deaf respondents whose first language is not English.

To create a safe environment in which to communicate freely, focus groups were configured homogeneously. This approach provided an opportunity for a diverse and varied mix of individuals who otherwise might be reluctant to share or disagree with more experienced participants—such as Deaf interpreters in a focus group with hearing interpreters, or hard of hearing/Blind or low vision individuals in a room with sign language-using DeafBlind individuals—to share thoughts, feelings, and anecdotes. Table 2 reflects the focus group configuration.

Focus groups took place onsite at conferences and events, as well as online and via teleconference. Using this approach allowed DBI to draw from for a wider pool of candidates from around the country, including individuals from more remote areas, rather than a specific geographic region.

In total, nine focus groups were completed, but not all groups were asked to systematically rank the eight competencies presented. Rather, facilitators attempted to draw out more anecdotal experiences using the competencies as prompts for stories and examples. While no demographic data was collected, the composition of the focus groups was varied and reflected vision/hearing loss, career status, racial, ethnic, age and geographic diversity, as well as LGBTQ identities.

### Focus Groups Conducted

##### Group #1: Rehabilitation Personnel

The first focus group was conducted by Heather Holmes, DBI Co-Director (Hearing/Sighted), in May 2017 with a mix of DeafBlind, Deaf and hearing participants attending the national American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association (ADARA) conference held in Portland, Oregon. Twelve representatives from the field of vocational rehabilitation included 3 hearing, 7 Deaf, and 2 DeafBlind individuals. Of this group, one male participant and 11 females were present. Among those who participated were professional VR counselors, case managers, one person who worked for Helen Keller National Center, Deaf and hearing interpreters who worked with DeafBlind individuals, and one person who worked as a DeafBlind specialist. The focus group was conducted in ASL with spoken language interpreters voice interpreting for access.

##### Groups #2 – 4: DeafBlind Individuals

Three additional focus groups were conducted in August 2017 at the Lighthouse for the Blind’s annual DeafBlind retreat, known as “Seabeck,” located in Seabeck, WA. Participants for these three groups were DeafBlind, however participants were separated out into groups who use sign language and those who are hard of hearing and low vision or Blind. Two focus group were facilitated in American Sign Language. Participants were sign language users or utilized tactile ASL interpreters. These focus groups included 4 men and 2 women. In the third focus group, 3 female hard of hearing participants responded in spoken English, while the DeafBlind facilitator utilized sign language interpreters.

Recruitment efforts for participants included an advance email to the approximately 80 individuals who attended Seabeck, as well as daily announcements and a flyer in the packet of each registrant. Focus groups were limited to 4 participants per group. Roberto Cabrera, a DBI core team member, who is also a VR counselor, DeafBlind, and a sign language user, facilitated each focus group.

##### Groups #5 – 6: Deaf Interpreters/Interpreter Educators:

Focus groups were also conducted via video in October 2017 on the Zoom platform. These focus groups were facilitated by Ian Guzman Aranda, a Deaf interpreter who frequently works in DeafBlind settings. Chad A. Ludwig, a Deaf interpreter served as notetaker for the sessions. Geared toward Deaf interpreters currently engaged in service provision with DeafBlind individuals, as well as Deaf interpreter educators, participants included one female and three males. The recruitment effort for interpreters included a national email via DBI’s Constant Contact email distribution list and several Facebook pages (i.e., Seabeck DeafBlind Retreat, the RID DeafBlind Member Section, and Certified Deaf Interpreter groups).

##### Groups #7 – 8: Hearing Interpreters/Interpreter Educators:

The fourth set of focus groups were conducted via audio phone conference in October 2017 on FreeConference.com. Three focus groups geared for hearing interpreters currently engaged in service provision with DeafBlind individuals, as well as with hearing interpreter educators were facilitated by CM Hall, DBI Co-Director (Hearing/Sighted). These focus groups totaled 9 hearing participants, all female. The recruitment effort for interpreters included a national email via the Constant Contact email distribution list and several Facebook pages including the Seabeck DeafBlind Retreat, the RID DeafBlind Member Section, and the SSPs/Interpreters/Interveners groups.

# Interviews

Once the *Competencies Survey* had officially closed, interviews were conducted with recognized experts in this field of specializations. The purpose of this activity was to compare the KABS deemed important by practitioners who interpret on a daily basis against those of the experts who shape the field (e.g., educators, leaders, etc.). The design of this activity was qualitative rather than quantitative in nature.

## Methodology

With the goal of “drilling down” further, participants were asked to complete an in-depth online interview form assessing the identified competencies required of DeafBlind interpreters. 150 stakeholders were invited to participate. The experts were drawn from a predetermined list that included referrals by members of the DBI Core Team, entities who submitted letters of intent or support when the DBI grant was first being constructed, and by personal invitation. Of the 150 invitations, 41 experts completed an interview.

### Table 2: Focus Group and Interview Participant Overview

| **Group** | **Stakeholder Domain Cluster (Total Participants)** | **Location** | **Date** | **Participants** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Mixed: VR counselors, case managers, DeafBlind interpreters, DeafBlind specialist, Deaf interpreters, hearing interpreters (12) | Focus Group: ADARA Conference | May 25, 2017 | 12 |
| 2 | DeafBlind Consumers (7) | Focus Group: Seabeck | August 29, 2017 | 4 |
| 3 | DeafBlind Consumers (7) | Focus Group: Seabeck | August 29, 2017 | 2 |
| 4 | DeafBlind Consumers (7) | Interview: Seabeck | August 29, 2017 | 1 |
| 5 | Hard of Hearing (DeafBlind Consumers) (3) | Focus Group: Seabeck | August 29, 2017 | 3 |
| 6 | DeafBlind Content Experts (9) | Asynchronous Interview | October 20, 2017 | 9 |
| 7 | DeafBlind Interpreter Educator (1) | Asynchronous Interview | October 20, 2017 | 1 |
| 8 | Deaf Interpreters/ Interpreter Educators (14) | Focus Group: Videoconference | October 9, 2017 | 2 |
| 9 | Deaf Interpreters/ Interpreter Educators (14) | Focus Group: Videoconference | October 10, 2017 | 2 |
| 10 | Deaf Interpreters/ Interpreter Educators (14) | Interview: Videoconference | October 12, 2017 | 1 |
| 11 | Deaf Interpreters/ Interpreter Educators (14) | Asynchronous Interviews | October 1, 2017 | 9 |
| 12 | Hearing Interpreters/Educators (22) | Focus Group: Teleconference | October 10, 2017 | 3 |
| 13 | Hearing Interpreters/Educators (22) | Focus Group: Teleconference | October 11, 2017 | 3 |
| 14 | Hearing Interpreters/Educators (22) | Focus Group: Teleconference | October 12, 2017 | 3 |
| 15 | Hearing Interpreters/Educators (22) | Asynchronous Interviews | October 1, 2017 | 13 |
| 16 | DeafBlind Advocacy Agency Personnel (6) | Asynchronous Interviews | October 20, 2017 | 6 |
| 17 | Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (3) | Asynchronous Interviews | October 20, 2017 | 3 |

# Key Findings and Themes

## Key Findings and Themes Across Stakeholder Groups

When possible, focus group participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 -10 the importance of the eight competencies, with 10 being the most important. A number of key themes also emerged from these final two activities of the *Needs Assessment.*

Many common themes emerged across all stakeholder groups. Among them:

* Autonomy is the highest priority and often requires interpreters to understand how to give up power so DeafBlind people can be more autonomous
* Interpreters must be involved in the DeafBlind community
* Interpreters must be flexible, adaptable, and willing to make adjustments
* Interpreters must be comfortable with varying degrees of touch
* A respect for varying communication styles is essential
* Interpreters must be willing to disclose which languages they are fluent/proficient in using (VASL, TASL, PTASL, ASL, PSE)
* More skill in how to work with people who are hard of hearing and have low vision is essential for a competent interpreter
* Teamwork is really important
* Not everyone likes tactile or PTASL, so it’s important to be impartial and allow people to communicate the way that is most comfortable for them
* More training is needed: infused in IEP curriculum, workshops, and classes
* A certification in DeafBlind interpreting should be a priority
* It is offensive when interpreters say, “I don’t do tactile” as a blanket statement
* Specialized knowledge allows for more effective communication and less frustrations (technology, braille, mobility)
* Specialty areas should be addressed (VR, medical, legal, educational)
* Understanding the fundamentals of hearing and vision loss is important
* Knowledge of the VR system is important
* Many DeafBlind interpreters are not qualified and/or highly trained to work with Deafblind individuals

We also noticed that some themes seemed to appear only in certain stakeholder groups. Those themes and their prevalence within stakeholder groups are listed in Table 3.

### Table 3: Key Themes Across Stakeholder Groups

| **Key Theme** | **Deaf interpreters** | **Hearing interpreters** | **Interpreter educators** | **DeafBlind individuals** | **DeafBlind Content Experts** | **DeafBlind Advocacy Agency Personnel** | **Vocational Rehabilitation professionals** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Physical stamina is important when considering working as a DeafBlind interpreter |  | Hearing interpreters | Interpreter educators | DeafBlind individuals | DeafBlind Content Experts |  | Vocational Rehabilitation professionals |
| Understanding assistive technology is important because it supports communication needs |  | Hearing interpreters | Interpreter educators | DeafBlind individuals | DeafBlind Content Experts | DeafBlind Advocacy Agency Personnel | Vocational Rehabilitation professionals |
| DeafBlind individuals should be allowed to use their preferred interpreters- it makes everything more streamlined | Deaf interpreters |  |  | DeafBlind individuals | DeafBlind Content Experts | DeafBlind Advocacy Agency Personnel | Vocational Rehabilitation professionals |
| There is a strong need for mentorship and feedback for interpreters | Deaf interpreters | Hearing interpreters | Interpreter educators |  |  |  |  |
| There needs to be more clarification around the roles of SSPs and DeafBlind Interpreters | Deaf interpreters |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| DeafBlind culture is not the same as Deaf culture. It is unique and needs to be respected. | Deaf interpreters | Hearing interpreters |  | DeafBlind individuals | DeafBlind Content Experts |  |  |
| It is not appropriate to ask a person about the degree of their hearing/vision loss (e.g., how much can you see/how much can you hear) | Deaf interpreters | Hearing interpreters |  | DeafBlind individuals | DeafBlind Content Experts |  |  |
| Recognition of hearing and/or sighted privilege is important | Deaf interpreters |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| DeafBlind interpreting requires managing greater demands/ can be difficult to know what information to drop or filter | Deaf interpreters | Hearing interpreters |  |  |  |  |  |
| Interpreting agencies send unqualified interpreters because they don’t know what DeafBlind individuals need |  |  |  | DeafBlind individuals | DeafBlind Content Experts |  |  |
| Don’t send new interpreters to interpret for DeafBlind consumers. |  |  |  | DeafBlind individuals |  |  |  |
| Everything takes longer when working with DeafBlind individuals, so it is important to plan for this in advance | Deaf interpreters | Hearing interpreters | Interpreter educators |  |  | DeafBlind Advocacy Agency Personnel | Vocational Rehabilitation professionals |

## Key Themes Across Competencies

Table 4 lists key themes as they relate to the identified competencies.

### Table 4: Key Themes Across Competencies

| **Key Themes** | **Competencies** |
| --- | --- |
| Autonomy is the highest priority and often requires interpreters to understand how to give up power so DeafBlind people can be more autonomous | 1 |
| Must be involved in the DeafBlind community | 5 |
| Must be flexible, adaptable, and willing to make adjustments | 3, 5 |
| Must be comfortable with varying degrees of touch | 3 |
| Respect for varying communication styles is essential | 3, 5 |
| Interpreters must be willing to disclose which languages they are fluent/proficient in using (VASL, TASL, PTASL, ASL, PSE) | 3, 4 |
| More skill in how to work with people who are hard of hearing and have low vision | 3,7 |
| Physical stamina is important when considering working as a DeafBlind interpreter | 2 |
| Teamwork is really important | 1, 2 |
| Understanding assistive technology is important because it supports communication needs | 7 |
| Not everyone likes tactile or PTASL, so it’s important to be impartial and allow people to communicate the way that is most comfortable for them | 3, 5 |
| More training is needed: infused in IEP curriculum, workshops, and classes | 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 |
| A certification in DeafBlind interpreting should be a priority | 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8 |
| It is offensive when interpreters say, “I don’t do tactile” as a blanket statement | 3, 5 |
| DeafBlind individuals should be allowed to use their preferred interpreters- it makes everything more streamlined | 1, 5 |
| There is a strong need for mentorship and feedback for interpreters | 1,4,5 |
| There needs to be more clarification around the roles of SSPs and DeafBlind Interpreters | 3, 7 |
| Specialized knowledge allows for more effective communication and less frustrations (technology, braille, mobility) just some introductory content knowledge | 6,7,8 |
| Specialty areas should be addressed (VR, medical, legal, educational) | 6,7,8 |
| DeafBlind culture is not the same as Deaf culture. It is unique and needs to be respected. | 1, 5 |
| It is not appropriate to ask a person about the degree of their hearing/vision loss (e.g., how much can you see/how much can you hear) | 5 |
| Understanding the fundamentals of hearing and vision loss is important | 6 |
| Recognition of hearing and/or sighted privilege is important | ? |
| Knowledge of the VR system is important | 8 |
| DeafBlind interpreting requires managing greater demands/ can be difficult to know what information to drop or filter | 2 |
| Interpreting agencies send unqualified interpreters because they don’t know what DeafBlind individuals need | 2,3,4,7 |
| Many DeafBlind interpreters are not qualified and/or highly trained to work with Deafblind individuals | 2,3,4,5,6,7 |
| Don’t send new interpreters to interpret for DeafBlind consumers. | 4 |
| Everything takes longer when working with DeafBlind individuals, so it is important to plan for this in advance | 1 |

# Next Steps

The focus groups and interviews were the two of the last activities of the 2017 *DBI Needs Assessment*. The findings of these activities reinforced the findings of the preceding *Needs Assessment* findings, which captured 1,704 survey responses. Collectively, the *Needs Assessment* data identified a number of *Key Findings* that guided the construction of a slate of *Domains and Competencies* that should be demonstrated by every practitioner interpreting for DeafBlind individuals. The *Key Findings* and *Domains and Competencies* are described in Sections 6 and 7 of the *Report*. The final activity of the *Needs Assessment* entailed the vetting of the *Domains and Competencies.*

# References

Edmunds, H. (1999). *The focus group research handbook*. American Marketing Association. Chicago, IL: NTC/Contemporary Publishing Group.