

Making Queer Events Accessible for the Deaf Community: A How-To Guide

Prepared For: Queer Event Organizers in the Greater Vancouver Region on
behalf of the British Columbia Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf

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Foreword: Why is Accessibility at Queer Events Important?

Organizers of queer events in the Greater Vancouver Region should consider making their events accessible to the Deaf community for a number of reasons. The prevalence of queer identities within Deaf communities has always been fairly high, with some sources estimating a 15 percent higher prevalence of queerness within the Deaf community compared to wider hearing society (Klinger 12).

Despite the large number of queer people within Deaf communities, queer resources that are accessible for Deaf people remain sparse. For instance, while HIV prevention is a priority for many programs designed for gay men, a 2004 study concluded that these programs are tremendously inaccessible to Deaf men, suggesting “an extraordinary risk for adverse mental and physical health outcomes if care is not appropriately designed for this vulnerable population” (Mallison 1). In addition, a 2001 study by Leblanc & Tully demonstrated that Deaf-queer people were frequently isolated from queer communities due to accessibility issues, with only 55.8% of Deaf-queer respondents considering themselves part of an LGBT community (66) and with the majority of these respondents considering support services within the LGBT community to be “inadequate” or “barely adequate” (70). As providers of support and services for the queer community, queer event organizers need to understand that Deaf people are often marginalized even within queer communities – and that their decisions to address accessibility contribute towards alleviating the inequalities that Deaf-queer people face in queer communities.

However, information on how to produce an event that is accessible for the Deaf community can be difficult to find. This manual compiles basic considerations

and processes that an event planner can follow to make their event more accessible for Deaf people. The first section of the manual will discuss how to source sign language interpreters appropriate for queer events and how to provide interpreters with the resources they need to do their jobs. The second section will discuss additional accessibility considerations (such as lighting or seating), including the needs of hard-of-hearing, oral deaf, and deaf-blind people. Finally, the third section will discuss how to advertise an accessible event to the Deaf community, including tips on how to be sensitive of Deaf Culture.

Coordinating Interpretation for your Event

The process of sourcing, hiring, and working with an interpreter is more complex than just asking an interpreter to show up at your event. For instance, interpreters can have different backgrounds and specializations, meaning you cannot necessarily source an interpreter for a theatre performance in the same way as one for a medical conference. This section outlines some of the considerations you need to take into account to ensure that your event is interpreted effectively. To ensure that you can arrange interpretation for your event, we advise that you begin these steps at least a month before your event begins.

Step 1: Consider your Interpreting Requirements

- How many hours will your event take, and how much speaking will there be?
 - Interpreting is a very mentally and physically demanding task.
 - To prevent fatigue and damage to their hands, interpreters have a time limit on how long they can interpret for before needing a break.
 - If your event spans for more than one hour of constant talking, you will need at least two interpreters.
- How is your event structured?
 - Different types of events (such as presentations, social gatherings, stage work, etc.) may require different skills or comfort levels.

- Communicate the situations that will need to be interpreted to prospective interpreters, so that they can assess if they are qualified or not.
- If your event requires groups to split up, you may need more interpreters.
- What specialized concepts/terminology will be covered at your event?
 - American Sign Language is distinct from English, and has its own signed vocabulary.
 - Interpreters who do not have a background working with Deaf-queer people may not have the vocabulary or context for queer events.
- What community is the event intended to serve?
 - For example, for stage performances at Pride events, BCRAD considers using visibly queer interpreters to make attendees feel more comfortable.

Guidelines on using Volunteer Interpreters

Queer event planners frequently ask if they can use volunteer interpreters at their events. It is important to understand that volunteer interpreters may not be appropriate for all events, as they are generally interpreting students who may not have the skills or stamina to interpret in many situations. While volunteer interpreters save money, access takes priority over cost; volunteer interpreters are not prepared

to handle the speed and content of most assignments, potentially locking Deaf people out of events.

Please consider the following constraints before requesting a volunteer interpreter.

- Volunteer interpreters may not have the stamina for lengthy assignments. Any event that involves more than an hour of speaking is not appropriate for a student.
- Volunteer interpreters may not have the experience to translate American Sign Language into English without skewing the message. Deaf people may feel silenced at your event if it involves a situation where the interpreter may need to voice for them.
- Events that communicate important information are generally not appropriate for volunteer interpreters, as quality of interpretation can sometimes be unreliable.
- As students, volunteer interpreters may not have the skills to manage their work conditions, such as asking for clarification or ensuring that they get breaks.

In almost all situations, BCRAD recommends using a professional interpreter. However, if you feel like your event is appropriate for a volunteer interpreter, Douglas College maintains a student volunteer interpreter service on their website. Another option is to use a volunteer interpreter paired with a strong professional interpreter, but this set-up will need the approval of the professional interpreter beforehand, as not all interpreters are comfortable with supporting a student. If you have questions

about whether your event is appropriate for volunteer interpretation, please contact BC RAD at info@bcrad.com.

Step 2: Sourcing an Interpreter

Interpretation can cost anywhere from \$30 - \$55 per hour per interpreter, depending on the experience of the interpreter and on if the interpreter is hired through an agency or not. As funding for accessibility is limited, we advise organizations to budget appropriately for their events. Non-profit organizations should include accessibility in their grant funding applications. While not always reliable, some queer organizations have successfully funded interpreters in the past by soliciting their members for donations through means such as Kickstarter. Finally, PI Signs offers a grant for events for up to two interpretation hours at a time (note this money is divided between interpreters, so if you need two interpreters, it can only cover one hour).

- BC RAD maintains a directory of queer-friendly interpreters on their website.
 - For organizations that have not worked with an interpreter in the past, establishing contact with an interpreter directly can be difficult.
- For organizations that need assistance navigating the process of finding an interpreter, Maggie Harkins provides an interpretation coordination service.
 - Maggie Harkins is a professional interpreter who serves as the Secretary/Treasurer of BC RAD. Her services involve personally matching, contacting, and debriefing interpreters for queer events, so that you have the best fit for your event possible.

- Contact Maggie through her email at maggie.harkins@gmail.com.
- WAVLI (the West-Coast Association of Visual Language Interpreters) maintains a directory of sign language interpreters within British Columbia.
- There are four interpreting agencies in the Greater Vancouver Region – WIDHH (The Western Institute of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing), PI Signs, Still Interpreting, and ASL Interpreting Inc.
 - Booking through an agency is more expensive than hiring an interpreter directly.
 - Give the agency the name(s) of any specific interpreter(s) you would like to work with.
 - Otherwise, you are not guaranteed to get an interpreter whose background matches your event, as these services frequently choose interpreters on a first-come first-serve basis (with the exception of legal/medical situations.)

Step 3: Contacting an Interpreter

We recommend that you contact each interpreter with an individual email when requesting events rather than sending a mass email, as more personal requests are more likely to get a response. When emailing an interpreter, include several essential pieces of information:

- the location, date, and time of your event;
- a description of the event;

- the length of the event;
- and a contact name and information.

You can also ask that your request be forwarded to other interpreters if your original contact cannot take the job. Interpreters are often familiar with the work of other interpreters, and may be able to refer you to someone who is qualified to handle your event.

Inquire about the interpreter's cancellation policy. For example, many interpreters have a 48-hour cancellation policy, where there is no charge for cancelling a booking with at least 48 hour's notice. Knowing an interpreter's cancellation policy is important is because it allows you to provide "confirmed need" interpretation for your event. Confirmed need interpretation books the interpreters ahead of time and advertises that interpreters have been secured, but advises Deaf people to confirm that they will be attending. If no one confirms the need for interpretation services prior to the cancellation policy deadline, you may cancel the interpretation booking. Confirmed need interpretation is preferable over having Deaf people request interpreters, which can pose barriers for many people. We discuss this topic further in the "Communicating Accessibility" section.

Step 4: Preparation and Set-Up

In order to interpret your event effectively, interpreters generally require preparation materials. English-to-ASL interpretation is a complex translation task that cannot always be easily handled on-the-spot, so preparation materials ensure that information is communicated smoothly.

- Provide interpreters with all speaking notes ahead of time (one week or more is preferable, but this depends on upon how much content there is to go through.)
 - Speaking notes include scripts, agendas, songs, poetry transcripts, speeches, etc.
- Provide interpreters with a list of speaker names and pronouns if available. If you are doing an acknowledgement of unceded Aboriginal territory component in your event, provide interpreters with the names for the nations acknowledged.
- Provide interpreters with a check-in contact upon arrival at the event.
- Let interpreters know if speakers at your event will be using spoken English, American Sign Language, or both.
 - If you have Deaf speakers, interpreters can voice any signed content for hearing audience members.
- Speak to all performers or speakers at your event to inform them that interpreters will be at the event and to ask them to provide any spoken notes they may have to the interpreters ahead of time.
 - Not all speakers are accustomed to preparing spoken notes ahead of time. We suggest that you communicate an expectation of speakers to provide notes at least a week in advance.
- If your event involves a rehearsal, offer to let the interpreter attend if possible.

- A rehearsal is also an excellent opportunity to ensure that the technical set-up is appropriate. For instance, stage lighting may need to be adjusted so the interpreter is visible throughout the event.
- Provide interpreters with information on the expected audience for your event, as well as any other context for the event you can think of.

Further Accessibility Considerations

While interpreting is a very important component of accessibility, interpreting alone is often not enough to make your event fully accessible. The Vancouver Deaf-queer community comprises of more than just deaf people who use American Sign Language. For example, many of our members identify as hard-of-hearing, oral deaf, or deafened, which means that they tend to use spoken English as their primary mode of communication – and may not have enough fluency in sign language to benefit from interpreters as much. Other members may have disabilities that require you to provide more resources than just an interpreter to attend an event. In this section, we address some additional considerations you may take to reduce barriers at your event.

Real Time Captioning

Captionists are people who transcribe what is being said at an event in real time. The transcriptions are frequently projected onto a screen so anyone present at the event can read what is being said. As not everyone is fully fluent in sign language, captioning can make your event more accessible for a wider range of people. Keep in mind that while the people who can benefit from captioning and from interpreting frequently overlap, captioning and interpreting are not entirely interchangeable. American Sign Language and English are separate languages; especially given the myriad of barriers that Deaf people face in English education, many may struggle with written English vocabulary and grammar. The most accessible events will have both interpreting and captioning.

One agency that provides real-time captioning in Vancouver is Accurate Realtime Inc. However, as captioning tends to be very expensive, BCRAD also runs a volunteer captioning service (more information is available on their website). Note that the quality of volunteer captioning may be high variable, tending to be lower than that of professional paid captioning.

Assistive Technology

Some hard-of-hearing people may want to use microphones or FM Systems, portable devices that relay sound directly to hearing aids. These devices may need to be clipped onto a primary speaker, or passed around in a group context. Having a clear accessibility statement (covered in the next part of this section) helps people know who to contact to facilitate set-up of this technology.

Deaf-Blind Accessibility

Deaf-Blind people generally require additional interpreters. Some Deaf-Blind people use tactile interpretation (hand over hand), and may require one or two interpreters with qualifications in this regard. Others require close vision, which also requires them to have their own interpreters; sometimes, these interpreters will watch and “echo” what the main interpreters are saying to their Deaf-Blind client. Deaf-Blind interpreters will also include visual information, such as PowerPoints or body language, in their interpretation. As specific needs tend to vary from person to person, ask the Deaf-Blind person what they would prefer; sometimes they will have specific interpreters they would like to work with. As the process of requesting

interpretation can sometimes be intimidating, writing a strong accessibility statement can encourage Deaf-Blind people to attend your event.

Make sure any information placed on online graphics or printed materials is accessible.

- For banners, posters, or other graphics online, include a written image description below the picture with basic information on what the picture displays, and a transcript of any text that may appear on the picture.
- For printed posters, consider using large print text with clear fonts that contrast well with the poster background.
- Consider printing any essential information in Braille and in large print.

Lighting and Seating

Having good visual access is essential for Deaf people, as the majority rely upon visual information to facilitate communication. Consider the following guidelines for seating and lighting.

- Reserve accessibility seats at the front of performances or presentations.
- Place the interpreter close to the speakers. If the interpreter is too far away, Deaf people may be forced to look back and forth between the interpreter and the speakers, causing them to potentially miss important visual cues.
- If your event involves dimming the lights, place a spotlight on the interpreter.
- If your event is a social event, have consistent and bright lighting throughout the venue so that people can lip-read.

- Deaf-Blind people may require specialized seating set-ups. For instance, many interpretation methods require two seats facing each other. Ask the Deaf-Blind person for their needs.
- Deaf-Blind interpreters will need to be able to see any sources of visual information (e.g. PowerPoint slides, speakers) from where they are seated.

Communicating Accessibility

Once you have decided on your plan for accessibility for your event, the next step is to let people know that your event is accessible. When communicating accessibility on your event pages and promotions, include several key pieces of information.

- List all dates and times for interpretation at your event(s).
 - If you don't know if Deaf people are attending, "confirmed need" interpretation is preferable to asking people to request interpreters.
 - Confirmed need interpretation books interpreters in advance, but asks people to confirm they need an interpreter. If no one confirms, the booking is cancelled.
 - List a deadline that people need to confirm by for confirmed need interpretation.
- Include a physical accessibility audit, if available.
 - A physical accessibility audit is a form that describes physical accessibility features present at your venue.
 - Many event venues in Vancouver already have audits available; if your venue does not, the Radical Access Mapping Project can provide audits if contacted in advance.
 - If you cannot secure an accessibility audit, briefly describe any accessibility features of the venue (washrooms, ramps, elevators, etc.)

- Include information on who to contact for questions or concerns regarding accessibility.
 - Include multiple ways to contact this person (such as email, text, phone number, etc)
- Including specific details on what accessibility accommodations people should contact you in advance for can make your event more inviting to people with additional barriers.
 - Writing “additional interpreters can be secured on demand” can encourage Deaf-Blind people to contact you.
- Be aware and sensitive of Deaf Culture.
 - The Deaf view themselves as a language minority; we discuss this further in the subsequent section.

Conducting Outreach to the Deaf Community

It may be difficult to inform Deaf people of your event if you only advertise through conventional means. For example, consider that in theatre, not many performances are interpreted, so Deaf people have become accustomed to expecting inaccessibility as the norm. If you only promote a play on a standard listing, you may not get many Deaf attendees. In this section, we outline strategies you can use to encourage Deaf people to attend your interpreted event.

Sensitivity towards Deaf Culture

Deaf people view themselves as a language minority. To them, deafness is a natural human variation that leads to a rich culture revolving around the use of signed languages. When communicating with Deaf people, follow these tips to be sensitive of this cultural heritage. A full overview of Deaf Culture is beyond the scope of this manual; while we provide basic tips, we suggest that anyone who is interested in learning more look to the internet for more information. The Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (www.deafculturecenter.ca) provides resources on their website.

- Understand the difference between “Deaf” and “deaf”.
 - A capitalized Deaf refers to people who consider themselves culturally Deaf.
 - A lower case deaf refers to the disability.
- Be aware that ASL is a source of culture and pride for Deaf people.

- Be aware that ASL is a full language with its own grammar and syntax, not a signed version of English.
- Avoid language that may alienate Deaf people.
 - Terms like “hearing impaired” imply that there is something inherently wrong about being deaf, as “impaired” suggests that hearing is standard and anything different as hindered or damaged.
 - Avoid calling Deaf people “inspirational”.

Make Postings on Deaf Community Hubs

- Send a posting to DeafBC.ca.
 - DeafBC is a blog, maintained by the Greater Vancouver Association of the Deaf, that posts news, services, and events relevant to the Deaf community in British Columbia.
 - To get your event featured on DeafBC, send a description of your event (as well as any other promotional materials) to gvadoffice@gmail.com.
- For queer specific events, send a posting to BCRAD.
 - BCRAD maintains a calendar of accessible queer events on their Facebook page.
 - BCRAD also maintains partnerships, which frequently involve assisting queer organizations with outreach. Take a look at their “Partnership” page on their website for more information.

- You can email your posting to info@bcrad.com
- Make a physical posting on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program listing board at the Vancouver Community College (VCC).
 - VCC is located at 1155 East Broadway Street, Vancouver.
- Personally invite any Deaf people you may know, and ask them to invite anyone who they think will be interested.
 - Information in Deaf communities frequently spreads by word of mouth. A personal endorsement is highly effective at encouraging people to attend your event.

Vlogs

Due to frequent barriers in English education, some Deaf people have English as a second language and may struggle with reading English. If your promotions are entirely in written English, they may not be entirely accessible. A more accessible way to disseminate information is through vlogs (video blogs). For event promotion, a vlog is a short video of someone signing information about your event in ASL, to be uploaded onto YouTube and shared within Deaf networks.

To produce a vlog, you need someone fluent in sign language – preferably a Deaf person, as some people may find it offensive for a hearing person to be featured in a vlog that represents your organization, especially if the hearing person is not fully fluent in ASL. BCRAD frequently produces vlogs to promote the events of their queer organizational partners. If you need any assistance in producing a vlog, contact BCRAD at info@bcrad.com.

Financial Accessibility

Many Deaf people are economically marginalized. For instance, Deaf people frequently face discrimination in looking for jobs. If participation in your event requires a fee, many Deaf people may not be able to attend. Consider the following suggestions for financial accessibility when developing an event as well.

- Provide discounts for ticket purchases for members of the Deaf community.
- Implement sliding scale-ticket practices.
 - Sliding-scale practices involve setting a range for ticket prices (e.g. \$5 - \$15) and asking attendees to pay what they can.
- Implement a “no one turned away for lack of funds” policy.
- Send free tickets to Deaf community organizations to distribute to their members in need.

Conclusion: Collecting Feedback after your Event

Accessibility is a continuing process. While we provide general tips on accessibility in this manual, remember that these are just best practices that work for most people – but not all. When working with individual community members, you may find that their needs or preferences are different from what we outline above. Therefore, as you get a sense for the specific make-up of your community and as you continue to invite people in, you may need to adjust or expand on practices to even further reduce barriers at future occurrences of your event.

One way to see avenues for improvement is by collecting feedback after events.

- Develop survey specifically requesting feedback on accessibility.
- On your website, include contact information or a form for relaying comments, questions, or critique on accessibility.
- Talk to Deaf people who have attended your event to get an idea of how they felt the event went.

Thank you for your commitment to creating a more accessible queer community. If you have any questions or concerns relating to accessibility for the Deaf community, please contact BCRAD at info@bcrad.com.

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