

Frequently Asked Questions

ASL Access to Alcoholics Anonymous for the Deaf Alcoholic

The following is a list of questions (and answers) commonly asked regarding ASL access for the deaf alcoholic. While this information was compiled and is being distributed by the District 41 ASL Committee (Western Washington Area), much of the general information provided comes directly from AA Guidelines (Carrying the A.A. Message to the Deaf Alcoholic – MG13 & Serving the Alcoholic with Special Needs – MG16).

How many Deaf alcoholics are there? Currently in the state of Washington, there are approximately 650,000 individuals with a hearing loss. From that number, 14,000 individuals are profoundly deaf. According to Deaf community reports, one out of every seven deaf individuals will become an alcoholic compared with one out of every ten in the hearing population. There is published evidence the substance abuse and in addition are up to three times more common in the disabled population.

It's clear that many districts/groups in our area need to provide interpreters for regular AA meetings, but is there a need for ASL access to service meetings?

Many AA members have stayed sober because they were able to participate in service work. With deaf alcoholics there is a strong need for them to participate in service events to learn about the AA traditions and twelve concepts of world service. This will help provide them with the tools they need for their own long-term sobriety as well as carry the message to other deaf alcoholics. Even if you only see one deaf service member, remember that one-person in-turn carries the message to others.

Why not use volunteers to do sign language interpretation of AA meetings? There are few volunteers available who are also members of AA. Due to the complexity of interpreting, it is not guaranteed that the volunteer is fluent in interpreting, or follows the code of ethics, which includes *anonymity*. Experience has shown that relying on volunteers doesn't work. We don't ask doctors or janitors to volunteer their services; neither do we ask professional interpreters to volunteer their services.

What is the cost of interpretation? The general rate is \$45.00 an hour, oftentimes a minimum of two hours, although some interpreters might waive the 2 hour minimum.

Why is it so expensive? Interpreters go to school to learn this skill of interpreting, after having studied (or in the case of children of deaf parents, acquired sign language naturally) ASL for a number of years. Interpreters are certified by one of two accreditation organizations after demonstration of skill as well as professionalism in the code of ethics. The interpreters who "free lance" must factor in overhead costs such as certification fees, mileage, and time used traveling between jobs, and so forth.

Can a deaf person just read the written materials provided if they cannot attend the meetings? Clearly understanding the written English materials will depend on the deaf person's educational background. ASL is most often the first language of the deaf person, whereas English is their second language. American Sign Language (ASL) is a visual language, and *not* a written language. ASL has its own linguistic rules, and includes visual cues for tone of voice and emotional content. It is not a coded form of English. ASL is a conceptual, visually spatial language with no direct word-for-word translation to English. Thus, knowledge about Alcoholics Anonymous is not communicated very well to the Deaf community, especially through written English.

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Presently the only AA literature available in ASL from the General Service Office is the first 164 pages of the Big Book (VS-1) and the Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions (VS-3). For many AAs the key to their sobriety is having the opportunity to hear other AA members share their experience, strength, and hope in sobriety and service. Alcoholics who are Deaf have no access to the Big Book AA stories and find very limited access to AA meetings, and service events, thus makes it difficult for them to learn how others members of AA stay sober and how do service work.

Why don't deaf people start their own meeting? There have been attempts in the past to start up AA meetings conducted in ASL, but often these groups do not get input or feedback from old timers as to how to use the Traditions to keep it an AA meeting. The majority of the participants are new to sobriety and have had very limited exposure to AA meetings, service, and the AA traditions. These groups often do not have the experience, strength, and hope offered from AA meetings that have participants with long-term sobriety and experience in service.

Why aren't more deaf people showing up at interpreted meetings? It depends on many factors, most related to having enough AA members with long-term sobriety willing to do 12-step work. We need more people willing to help get the current/correct interpreted meetings schedules to all our AA resources and service committees including posted on our AA websites. We also need to improve on getting the interpreted meeting list out to the Deaf community resources. We need more volunteers willing to sponsor, give rides, and do basic newcomer service work with the deaf alcoholics.

Listed below are some of the things that have been reported by deaf alcoholics.

- 1) There have been reports of deaf people contacting local Intergroup offices or district hotlines and being told that there were no interpreted meetings. (Often these responses are provided volunteers, not aware of interpreted meetings.)
- 2) The hard copies schedules and websites schedules don't show a current list of meetings that are interpreted. They didn't know anything about the monthly-interpreted meeting calendar. (Note: Interpreted meetings may vary from month to month, due to limited funding by groups, and meeting schedules are usually printed less frequently. A current calendar to ASL interpreted meetings for AA and other 12-step programs is available at <http://www.dhh12s.com>.)
- 3) They showed up at a meeting they were told was interpreted but there was no interpreter at the meeting. That person had gotten a ride from the town they lived in which was an hour away from the meeting. Someone at the meeting told them it used to be interpreted but not anymore.
- 4) Some have reported they don't have interpreted meetings in the town they live in and have no car/driver's license to get to the interpreted meeting. They have a hard time finding a dependable (sober) ride to & from the meeting.
- 5) Some have tried to bring their own interpreter to an AA meeting and were told to leave.
- 6) Others have reported that they were told that they cause trouble by bringing an interpreter to the meeting. The group didn't want them changing any seating arrangements etc. The hearing members didn't understand that it's important to have good lighting and to have a clear view of the interpreter. The interpreter also needed to be able to hear well to translate. Sitting in the corner of the back of the room doesn't work well.
- 7) Some have attended meetings that they were told were interpreted only to find a volunteer that barely signs much less translate English to ASL or ASL to voiced English.
- 8) Some of the deaf new comers feel they are treated differently then hearing newcomers. The hearing members seemed more willing to offer help to hearing newcomers than deaf

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newcomers-- more willing to give them email/phone lists, rides, sponsorship or even just chat after the meeting. The hearing members sometimes seem afraid to try to communicate with them.

Generally known and accepted that newcomers often relapse and are not very dependable. However, the deaf newcomers seem to have more required of them to be responsible, dependable, and not to relapses. Why? Because an interpreter is being paid; if a group sets up an interpreter for a newcomer and that newcomer doesn't show up, the members tend to resent that newcomer. And when the newcomer does show up instead of being welcomed back (like a hearing newcomer or someone that relapsed) some deaf newcomers are greeted with resentment. "We paid an interpreter and you didn't show up". And, sadly, sometimes the actions of a few are carried over to any deaf newcomer that attends.

Don't the deaf receive free interpretation services from the state or somewhere? Can't these services be used for AA meetings? Community Service Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing administers a block grant that provides moneys for interpreters for low income deaf people who live in Seattle. Usually 2 hours a month are allotted per person and usually used for basics such as communicating with a landlord, or a doctor. It is challenging for a newcomer to coordinate scheduling an interpreter, let alone know what to do when showing up at an AA meeting for the first time. In addition, the interpreter needs to get a signature from the group for the forms.

What is the District 41 ASL Committee, and what is it trying to do?

District 41 formed the ASL Committee in October, 2003. Its Mission is:

To facilitate carrying the message of AA recovery, unity and service to the deaf alcoholic.

Proposed Activities of the ASL Committee include the following:

- Funds collected will be used first to insure that interpretation services are available at the annual Western Washington Area Assembly.
- Excess funds will be used to provide interpreters for other AA service and meetings.
- The committee will also support the activities of other AA service committees, by communicating the availability of services for the deaf through involvement with Area Standing Committees.
- The committee will act a resource for other groups and districts interested in providing interpretation services at their meetings, either through information and/or seed money for interpretation when available.

The ASL Committee reports at 7:00 PM, during the first 30 minutes of the District 41 monthly GSR meeting, the 2nd Wednesday of the month, at Seattle Intergroup, 5507 - 6th Avenue South (at Lucille Street) in Seattle, 98108.

How can Alcoholics get involved in carrying the message to the deaf alcoholic?

- By sharing this FAQ and related AA service documents with others your home group or district.
- By participating in service committees or access committee in your own district or area, and include information for deaf alcoholics in service committee activities.
- By participating in the District 41 ASL Committee meeting or activities, which will include:
 - Locating qualified interpreters for meetings.
 - If you are a certified ASL interpreter and are willing to volunteer your services.
 - If you are a signer and are willing to sponsor a deaf alcoholic, do 12th step calls, or provide signing during fellowship at meetings or conferences.

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- Make presentations about the communication needs of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing alcoholic in order to assist groups within and outside of Greater Seattle Area.
- Make presentations to community and professional groups to inform them about interpreted meetings where the deaf are welcome.
- If you have a TTY and would be willing to give your phone number to a deaf newcomer.
- A.A. members, groups or districts may contribute to the District 41 ASL Committee to fund services described in the purpose above.
- A.A. members, groups or districts may sponsor/fund an interpreted meeting or service function.
- Work within the service structure to identify other means of carrying the message of recovery unity and service to and from the deaf alcoholic.

Didn't the Western Washington Area Assembly in 2003 vote against ASL interpreters? No. The Western Washington Area Assembly didn't vote against interpreters. (In fact there was a group/district sponsored interpreter at the 2003 Assembly.) A number of motions with various means of providing funds for ASL interpretation were rejected. In order to not limit the responsibility to a single group, the District 41 ASL Committee was established to respond to this need, as well as the larger need to carry the message to the deaf alcoholic. This committee allows those interested in supporting this need to do so.

Isn't it against AA traditions to gather funds for services like ASL interpretation?

According to our traditions, we are self-supporting through our own contributions. In AA meetings, we pass the basket to cover rent, coffee (sometimes cake), and other group expenses. We distribute Birthday envelopes for contributions to AA's General Service Board. We distribute flyers for members to pre-pay for the Western Washington Area History book, and to make voluntary contributions to pay for AA Public Service Announcement/Bus Signs. Before the Western Washington Area agreed on a method of funding the cost of AA literature in prisons, pink-colored coffee cans were passed around home groups and districts to fund that service. Providing a form to be used for contributions to the District 41 ASL Committee insures that money will be provided only by Alcoholics and directed to the specific purposes of that committee. Each group is autonomous and may choose whether or not to distribute this information to its members. On a similar note, the A.A. Guidelines, "Carrying the A.A. Message to the Deaf Alcoholic states, "Experience shared with GSO indicates that numerous areas have formed Special Needs Committees and this experience seems to indicate that these committees can be a partial solution to funding the cost of signers. Groups are encouraged to contribute and designate funds for these committees."

*If you have questions about the ASL Committee or wish to join in these efforts, please write to:
District 41, C/O American Sign Language Committee. PO Box 99132, Seattle, WA 98139*