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*The PEPNet
Past Posts is a
compilation of
the most
frequently
discussed topics
on the PEPNet
listserv.*

The PEPNet Listserv

Past Posts

THE IMPACT OF VRS ON POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

The explosive growth in video relay services (VRS) since its inception in 2002 has caused an ever increasing demand for sign language interpreters to staff VRS call centers across the country. This increased demand for interpreting services and the resulting higher wages paid to sign language interpreters in VRS settings has impacted postsecondary institutions. These institutions have found it difficult to compete with VRS centers in recruiting sign language interpreters needed to meet the institutions' legal obligations to provide interpreting services for Deaf students.

A recent survey completed by PEPNet with the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee found that at least *43.2% of the 132 institutions who responded have a video relay service (VRS) agency in their area which hires local interpreters.

*from the 2005 Survey of Postsecondary Interpreter Services: Salary and Program Demographics
<http://www.surveymonkey.com/DisplaySummary.asp?SID=918554&U=91855478570>

BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT VRS

Video Relay Services are free of charge to all telephone users, Deaf or hearing, as mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates VRS services and provides the services under contract with a number of agencies. VRS cannot be used as a substitute for in-person interpreting services where both deaf and hearing consumers are in the same location; VRS may only be used when consumers are connecting with one another through a telephone connection.

FCC facts on Video Relay:
<http://ftp.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/videorelay.html>

FCC facts on ADA and Video Relay:
<http://ftp.fcc.gov/cgb/dro/ada.html>

VRS's impact on postsecondary institutions has been a frequent hot topic on the PEPNet listserv. The following are a sampling of listserv posts since September 2004 that reflect how postsecondary institutions are addressing the issues related to competing with VRS centers for interpreting services.

Here's the story from today (an Opinion piece from an interpreter I know):

Story Link: <http://www.asuwebdevil.com/issues/2004/11/17/opinions/688886>

Here are the original stories:

<http://www.statepress.com/issues/2004/11/15/news/688838>

<http://www.statepress.com/issues/2004/11/16/news/688857>

With qualified interpreters in such short supply, Universities and Colleges all over the U.S. are going to be experiencing similar problems, if something doesn't change - and soon.

I could go to our local VRS (Video Relay Service) Center and earn twice what I am earning now, with benefits.

Waiting for the other shoe to drop...

*Portland State University
November, 2004*

...the use of relay for telecommunications requires people to be physically located apart. It is the same as the traditional relay caller- one must be voice mode and the other in text message mode.

FCC is very strict about the mixing of the two different technologies. VRI- Video remote interpreting means that the hearing and deaf are physically in the same location and the interp is providing communication access from a remote location. The payment for this service is the responsibility of the service provider not FCC.

For VRS, video relay service you cannot provide interpreting services to people who are in the same room and our training instructs the VI to inform the parties that this is not allowed under FCC regulations and disconnect from the call.

*Video Relay Service Center, Michigan
January, 2005*

With the VRS systems competing for skilled terps... programs running on shoestring budgets will find it increasingly more difficult to recruit, hire, & retain qualified interpreters.

The state of KY has passed legislation earmarking funds to reimburse postsecondary educational institutions for services such as interpreters, notetakers, and captioning systems. It also reimburses the salary for the D/HH Coordinator on campus. I believe the director who allocates those funds has a presentation on the history of how this was achieved.

It would be great if other states legislatures would pass this as well. If I ever move to another state, I plan to work on this! SMILE

There was a presentation at the National PEPNet conference in Pittsburg on how to operate during a crunch/interepreter shortage.

*Western Kentucky University
June, 2005*

The student would have to be using a telephone system/connection for example perhaps a teleconference concept. But like you said it is a slippery slope. The facility that is providing the class needs to be responsible to pay for the service not FCC.

The same equipment could work, but the billing would be to the service provider that has requested for this service. They are the ones that should be paying instead of FCC. This is a VRI concept not VRS.

*Video Relay Service Center, Michigan
January, 2005*

We hired more staff Interpreters!

*University of Minnesota
September, 2005*

Q. I just attended a presentation by Sorenson regarding Video Relay Interpreting and found that they are setting up a call center in our community. Those of you who have a call center in or near your universities, has it affected your ability to hire qualified Interpreters if so, how? Any other comments or opinions are appreciated.

*Submitted by University of Tennessee at Knoxville
January, 2005*

A. VRS has had a profound impact on the ability of this community college to provide services to Deaf students. We are using real time captioners for students who would prefer interpreters.

*City College of San Francisco
January, 2005*

A. We have a Sorenson VRS center in our area - and I will admit, the initial reaction at first was somewhat discouraging/upsetting (can't find the right word, it's a little of everything) BUT, good things have come out of this. We obviously do not have 'control' of people's choices of where they work, working within institutions of a limited budget/financial resources, and facing an already shortage of interpreters nationwide (qualified/certified/or what not)... I chose to collaborate with Sorenson --- the Director at the site nearby and I have developed a partnership—business relationship and work closely to find ways of how we can provide to meet our needs. While VRS work is 'new' for many, put yourselves in the interpreter's shoes -- - obviously something new and different from the norm is going to be appealing! We cannot hold anyone at fault for this --- we (interpreter coordinators) have an obligation to provide services to our students, so the Director who is VERY AWARE of our needs and had a vested interest in finding ways to work together, has encouraged individuals to consider a few hours a week of 'live - human contact' work here at the University. This is their way of getting interpreters to realize they are giving back to the community, being an 'important' part of the community, and recognition to their profession as they work in both capacities. For example, I have some people that work 15 hours here and 15 there, 9 hours here, 20 hours there, etc... we became creative with options and opportunities for individuals who work at both places --- we've partnered on providing professional development workshops (this is a great way to bring people together, network, etc). Several who work for both have said its great - they are Mentors for us here, they like to work certain assignments with us that they may not get through VRS work, it keeps their schedule 'spontaneous' and prevent burn-out, etc...

I have recommended to others - collaborate/partner with your VRS provider and find ways to create working possibilities for the interpreters at BOTH places. (yes there will be some interpreters you just cannot convince for whatever reason, but you'd be surprised at how some do have an interest with both). Talking with other institutions, I know that pay has been a difference/dilemma for several - this may be something we need to bring to the drawing board with our university folks and have lots of discussions....if anyone else has a different experience, would love to hear them.

*NCOD/CSUN
January, 2005*

A. As a long-time advocate for interpreters and Deaf folks, I am thrilled with the opportunities that VRS offers. As some of (my?) regular terps become interested in the VRS offerings, I am trying to work with them to think and behave creatively for the win-win of all. For example, I have two interpreters who are "sharing Fridays". They both have two Fridays on and two Fridays off a week to do with as they wish. This allows them to do some of the weekend VRS stuff once or twice a month and still takes care of the student requirements here at the University of Iowa. We are all trying to keep communication open. I have heard from reliable sources that Sorenson is not trying to take qualified interpreters out of the community setting. (even if some of us might be pressed to think so as we feel the pinch.)

I concur with what many of you have said - this new opportunity for interpreters just points out the need to continue to groom and support with adequate pay and benefits (don't I wish) qualified interpreters.

*University of Iowa at Iowa City
January, 2005*

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*University of Iowa at Iowa City
January, 2005*

I don't think too much time is being wasted on this topic - it seems that VRS providers have had a significant impact on the academic community. I do have one more question - some of you mentioned interpreters need to earn a "living wage." How much is a living wage? Each person would have a different definition for how much a living wage would be, but it'd almost certainly be more than what they're earning at that moment
smile

Seems I opened quite a big can of worms here when I brought up social responsibility. I liked reading everybody's posts and seeing all the different perspectives on this issue.

Here's a little anecdote for you all - there was a time (not that long ago) when sidewalks didn't have ramps in them so people in wheelchairs couldn't cross the street at intersections. Someone or the other decided that we needed to put in those ramps at crosswalks and street corners so wheelchairs could make it across. (and it was a great help to anybody who was trying to push a cart too!) What they did not foresee was the adverse impact on another group of people - the blind. Apparently because there was no longer a curb, some blind people didn't realize that they were at an intersection and walked into incoming traffic. To compensate for that, grooves were put into the ramps so the blind could identify where they were. The moral of the story: we gotta find our groove.

*California State University—Northridge
September 2005*

I would like to make comments after reading the comments from our colleagues. I am a Deaf professional and have experienced pros and cons about VRS. The biggest con about VRS is finding interpreters, not only for classes, but for appointments, such as doctors, therapies, treatments, etc, events (weddings), etc. It has put a strain on Deaf community due to no luck having interpreters for those occasions.

I understand business is business, but I agree there's social responsibility as well. When the colleagues made suggestions, training is an excellent idea, but its more for the long term plan and there's a very good chance the protégé' would go on to work for VRS, leaving us struggling to find interpreters again. Right now, everything's up in the air and hopefully we can balance between VRS and Deaf community.

When Barb mentioned, "Sure, interpreters make the courses more accessible and even maybe a little easier..... I would argue that even if *we* ("we" meaning us interpreters) weren't in the classroom, Deaf folks would still find a way to excel," her comment would cause a volcano in the Deaf community to erupt instantly! Many Deaf in the past would do anything to have interpreters in the classrooms to grab the chance to learn the lectures in class and to communicate with professors and classmates A LOT EASIER! CART, C-Print, etc. may do some goods, but how will it help Deaf to communicate with their colleagues and staff? It forces Deaf people to use second language which is English. Communication is the key today!

Yes, the VRS centers have made an offer interpreters could not refuse. When I went to the Open House, we, the Deaf Community, were put off by the comment from one of the VRS reps saying that "they did not steal the interpreters; the interpreters came to them." Would the interpreters, despite great work environment, comfortable chairs and luxury, be willing to work for VRS for \$12 an hour? I think not. Institutions, private or state, do not have the financial resources to match with VRS competitors. We increased our rate here at Northeastern University, unfortunately, we still do not get as many interpreters coming to work.

A interesting point related to social responsibility -- One VRS company has stated its refusal to provide benefits for same-sex partners due to their religious belief. I wonder if interpreters would work or not due to company's belief or would they ignore it?

*Northeastern University
September 2005*

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