



**AUSTRALIAN  
ASSOCIATION  
OF THE DEAF INC.**

**Position Paper  
on the  
Supply and Demand for Auslan Interpreting:  
the Deaf Perspective**



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## Background

Australian Association of the Deaf Inc (AAD) receives annual funding from the Department of Families, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA). AAD's 2006-07 funding agreement with FaCSIA required that we provide one policy paper for the Australian Government. AAD and FaCSIA agreed that the policy paper would focus on the supply and demand of Auslan interpreting.

In Australia today, there is growing concern about the increasing demand for Auslan interpreters and the difficulty that the available interpreters have in meeting the interpreting needs of the Deaf community. There have been several discussions between concerned organisations, individuals and government to explore ways that the issues can be resolved. The Australian Government commissioned Orima Research to do a report on the supply and demand of Auslan interpreters and this was completed in January 2004. As a result of this study, in 2004 the Australian Government allocated \$18.4 million over four years for private medical interpreting and the National Auslan Interpreter Booking and Payment Service (NABS) began operating early in 2005.

The Orima study was mainly interested in medical interpreting, but also looked at some of the issues related to interpreting supply and demand for legal and financial matters and for education and employment.

In 2006 the Australian Government provided funding to the Australian Federation of Deaf Societies to do a pilot study on the use of interpreting in employment. From January 2007, the Australian Government allocated \$5 million over 4 years for Auslan interpreting for some employment situations – the Auslan for Employment (AFE) program.

Despite these initiatives, many of the issues of supply and demand for Auslan interpreting continue, and some new issues have arisen.

To find out about the experiences and views of members of the Deaf community AAD prepared a discussion paper and questionnaire. This was sent to members and put onto the AAD website. Information sessions were also held in each capital city and some regional areas. The discussion paper and responses to the questionnaire form the basis of this position paper.

## Respondents to the survey

The survey contained 49 questions, with some questions having sub-questions. Multiple responses were allowed for some questions.

367 completed surveys were returned to AAD.

**Geographical distribution** of respondents by state was:

NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Australia
74	6	76	41	12	78	80	367
20%	2%	21%	11%	3%	21%	22%	100%

There was one respondent from the ACT. This response was included in the responses for NSW.

Of the total respondents, 333 (91%) were Deaf, 29 (8%) were hard of hearing, and 5 (1%) did not state their status.

**Gender distribution of respondents was:**

	NSW		NT		QLD		SA		TAS		VIC		WA		Australia	
Male	25	34%	0	0%	27	36%	20	49%	5	42%	28	36%	23	29%	128	35%
Female	45	61%	6	100%	46	61%	20	49%	6	50%	46	59%	55	69%	224	61%
Not stated	4	5%		0%	3	4%	1	2%	1	8%	4	5%	2	3%	15	4%
Total	74	100%	6	100%	76	100%	41	100%	12	100%	78	100%	80	100%	367	100%

**Age distribution of respondents was:**

	NSW		NT		QLD		SA		TAS		VIC		WA		Australia	
0-15	1	1%		0%		0%		0%		0%		0%	4	5%	5	1%
16-25	4	5%		0%	2	3%	5	12%	1	8%	1	1%	8	10%	21	6%
26-35	10	14%	3	50%	10	13%	7	17%	1	8%	8	10%	8	10%	47	13%
36-45	21	28%	1	17%	24	32%	12	29%	3	25%	24	31%	17	21%	102	28%
46-55	17	23%	2	33%	20	26%	6	15%	3	25%	19	24%	10	13%	77	21%
56-65	15	20%		0%	11	14%	9	22%	1	8%	18	23%	15	19%	69	19%
65 +	6	8%		0%	7	9%	1	2%	2	17%	8	10%	18	23%	42	11%
Not stated		0%		0%	2	3%	1	2%	1	8%		0%		0%	4	1%
Total	74	100%	6	100%	76	100%	41	100%	12	100%	78	100%	80	100%	367	100%

**Demand for Auslan interpreters**

The demand for interpreters is growing and changing. Many Deaf people now are more independent, better educated, more assertive and aware of their rights.

In the past, often Deaf people put up with doing without interpreters in many situations; or they relied on unqualified family or friends who knew some signs to do “language brokering” or ad hoc “interpreting” for them, not interpreting per se.

Many Deaf people still do this. When asked if there were occasions in the past 12 months when they could not get an interpreter, 53% of respondents said yes. However, an increasing number are now asserting their right to have an Auslan interpreter in all kinds of situations. Deaf people are requesting interpreters more often for more and more situations.

**Situations where interpreters are usually free**

There are many situations where Deaf people need an interpreter and can get the interpreter free. The interpreter is paid for by government or by the organisation providing the service or arranging the event.

Respondents said they use interpreters in the following situations:

- 67% use interpreters for appointments with doctors;
- 43% use them for appointments with other health professionals;
- 51% use them in public hospitals
- 39% use them for education activities;
- 37% use them for conferences;

44% use them for workplace meetings;  
26% use them when using employment services;  
48% use them for meetings with government departments;  
23% use them for courts appearances; and  
22% use them for other purposes.  
(Multiple responses were allowed.)

Deaf people were also asked how often they use interpreters:

9% use them once a week;  
23% use them more than once a week:  
16% use them once a fortnight;  
17% use them once a month:  
20% use them once every 2-3 months;  
11% use them at other intervals; and  
7% did not answer this question.  
(A few respondents answered this question more than once.)

However, consumers cannot always get an interpreter free for all of these situations. For example, some conference organisers provide interpreters, but this usually only happens if the conference is targeted at deaf people or people with disabilities. Most general conferences do not automatically provide interpreters. If a Deaf person wants to attend a conference and interpreters have not been included in the conference planning, they have to ask the organisers to provide interpreters.

Another example is education. Universities and TAFE usually provide interpreters but private educational organisations usually do not. Schools also do not always provide interpreters.

Often the Deaf person needs to be very assertive and persistent before organisations will agree to provide interpreters. Not all Deaf people are confident and assertive, so many people miss out on doing things they would like to do.

For some situations consumers can get an interpreter and the service provider will pay for it but they have to wait a lot longer for the service than a hearing person does (e.g. Centrelink).

Respondents were asked whether, in the past 12 months it had been difficult to get an interpreter for any of these situations. Responses were:

34% had difficulty getting interpreters for appointments with doctors;  
17% had difficulty getting them for appointments with other health professionals;  
24% had difficulty getting them at public hospitals  
19% had difficulty getting them for education activities;  
11% had difficulty getting them for conferences;  
24% had difficulty getting them for workplace meetings;  
11% had difficulty getting them when using employment services;  
27% had difficulty getting them for meetings with government departments;  
7% had difficulty getting them for courts appearances; and  
16% had difficulty getting them for other purposes.  
(Multiple responses were allowed.)

## Situations where consumers who want an interpreter often have to pay for the interpreter

There are many situations where it is difficult or impossible to get an interpreter unless the Deaf person pays for the interpreter.

For some of these situations, sometimes an interpreting agency will provide the interpreter free, e.g. most Deaf Societies will provide a free interpreter for funerals of close family members; some Deaf Societies will cover the cost of the interpreter for some kinds of counselling, e.g. domestic violence.

For some situations some organisations will sometimes pay for the interpreter, e.g. church services. Sometimes the “interpreter” provided by the organisation is not NAATI qualified, e.g. for parent/teacher interviews some schools will provide a staff “interpreter” who is a teacher’s aide with some signing skills.

What we have to pay for, and what we can get free is different in each state, and even within states. For example, a Deaf person in a capital city might be able to get an interpreter free for a wedding, but if they live in a regional area in the same state and there is no local interpreter, they might have to pay for the interpreter.

Some individual interpreters will sometimes do some interpreting on a pro-bono basis for things like private parties or for Deaf community events.

Deaf people were asked about their experiences in the following situations in the past 12 months and their responses were:

	I got interpreter free	I paid for interpreter	I did this without an interpreter
Family / social, e.g. weddings	22%	12%	33%
Children’s activities, e.g. school visit	17%	1%	24%
Purchasing goods and services	3%	1%	43%
Sporting activities	4%	1%	34%
Community meetings	29%	4%	21%
Public speeches	19%	1%	20%
Live theatre performances	13%	3%	22%
Emergencies, e.g. roadside help	8%	1%	32%
Religious, e.g. church services	22%	1%	21%
Non-job related education or hobby courses	7%	3%	25%
Private hospitals	25%	2%	23%
Private legal, e.g. solicitor	17%	7%	22%
Counselling, e.g. marriage, personal	20%	5%	17%
Financial advice and counselling	13%	7%	22%
Employment situations e.g. professional development	22%	4%	17%
Other	8%	1%	5%

Multiple responses were allowed, and some respondents did not answer this question.

Respondents were also asked what they would be prepared to do in the following situations:

	I would do it if interpreter is free	I would pay for interpreter if I can't get free interpreter
Family / social, e.g. weddings	58%	17%
Children's activities, e.g. school visit	45%	5%
Purchasing goods and services	45%	4%
Sporting activities	40%	5%
Community meetings	64%	5%
Public speeches	60%	4%
Live theatre performances	57%	4%
Emergencies, e.g. roadside help	56%	4%
Religious, e.g. church services	43%	2%
Non-job related education or hobby courses	48%	5%
Private hospitals	60%	5%
Private legal, e.g. solicitor	50%	10%
Counselling, e.g. marriage, personal	48%	9%
Financial advice and counselling	51%	8%
Employment situations e.g. professional development	48%	5%
Other	14%	2%

Multiple responses were allowed, and some respondents did not answer this question.

Responses show that many Deaf people would participate in activities if interpreters are provided but only small numbers of Deaf people are prepared to, or can afford to pay for interpreters. Significant numbers continue to take part in activities without interpreters.

## Supply of Auslan Interpreters

The growing demand for interpreters is resulting in a shortage of supply, and this shortage seems to be getting worse. There are more interpreters now, but it is harder to get them. There have been changes in how interpreters are supplied. What we expect from interpreters is also changing.

Issues that impact on the supply of interpreters are not just about whether we can get an interpreter when we need one, and how we get one, but are also about things like the quality of the interpreters we get.

Many of the issues are inter-related and impact upon each other. Fixing some issues will also help fix other issues, but the issues and inter-relationships are often complex. AAD has been saying for many years that a comprehensive big-picture research study needs to be done to "map" these issues and possible solutions, but so far government has only allocated funding to research projects into some parts of the big picture, not the whole.

### Issues:

#### 1. Not enough interpreters.

Clearly there are not enough interpreters to meet the demand. This was supported by

responses to question 9 which asked respondents if they think there are enough interpreters in their area and question 10 which asked Deaf people whether in the past 12 months they have requested an interpreter and been told by an agency that one could not be found.

67% of respondents said there are not enough interpreters in their area, and 48% said they had been told the agency could not find one, with many saying they had been told this on a number of occasions, some as often as 35 times in one year. On average each person had been told an interpreter could not be found approximately 6 times in the past 12 months.

There are now more NAATI qualified interpreters than ever before, but still there are not enough to meet the demand. The 2004 Orima study found there were 449 accredited interpreters but only 257 were actively working as interpreters. Part of the problem is that the number of full time interpreting positions is limited; a lot of interpreting is done on a freelance or casual basis, and a lot of interpreting situations are seasonal – e.g. educational interpreting is only available in school, TAFE and university term time. For this reason, a lot of qualified interpreters have other jobs and are only available for limited interpreting outside their normal working hours. Many other industries are seasonal and people working in those industries adjust their financial management to fit the cash flow patterns of their industry, and there is a view that interpreters may need to learn to do this too.

The majority of interpreters are accredited at para-professional level (level 2). The 2004 Orima study reported that 202 or 79% of active interpreters were accredited at para-professional level (level 2) and 55 or 21% were accredited at professional level (level 3). However, because Deaf people are improving their own skills and involvement in a range of areas of activity, there is an increasing demand for interpreter level (level 3) interpreters.

When Deaf people were asked which level of interpreter they usually need, 19% said they usually need a professional (level 3) interpreter, 14% said they usually need a para-professional (level 2) interpreter and 53% said they sometimes need a professional and sometimes a para-professional (13% of respondents did not answer this question).

When asked whether they can usually get a professional interpreter when they need one, 27% said yes, 13% said no, and 43% said sometimes (17% did not answer this question).

Since the number of professional interpreters is insufficient to meet the demand for them, often a para-professional interpreter is supplied when a professional is needed. Is this acceptable?

To find out Deaf people were asked whether they accept a para-professional interpreter if the agency cannot supply a professional interpreter. 40% said yes, 8% said no, and 37% said sometimes (16% did not answer this question).

Respondents were then asked whether they would accept any available interpreter regardless of their qualifications, skills or ethics if the agency could not supply an interpreter suitably qualified and acceptable. 40% of respondents said yes and 44% said no (16 percent did not answer this question).

Deaf people were also asked whether they think any interpreter (even if their skills or

ethics are not very good) is better than not having an interpreter at all. 34% said yes, 47% said no (19% did not answer this question).

These responses show that although a majority of respondents disapprove of using unsuitable interpreters, large numbers of Deaf people will accept or make do with sub-standard or unsuitable interpreting if there is no other choice, rather than have no access.

Many para-professional (level 2) interpreters do have professional (level 3) skills but have not sat a professional level NAATI test for various reasons. The reasons that interpreters are not upgrading their accreditation include the cost of the test; the minimal difference in pay rates between para-professional and professional levels; and the availability of work at para-professional level at a good level of pay. There is not enough incentive for interpreters to put in the effort and pay the fees to gain professional accreditation.

Deaf people also need to consider whether they should continue to accept any interpreter who is available even if they are unsuitable or insufficiently qualified. Refusing to use unsuitable interpreters would put more pressure on interpreters to upgrade their skills and qualifications.

Sometimes too, Deaf people resort to using unaccredited interpreters. Agencies who supply unaccredited interpreters usually claim that they only do this if they are confident the interpreter has the skills for the assignment and/or if the interpreter is in training and will soon be sitting for a NAATI accreditation. But is this acceptable? Since 40% of respondents said they would accept any available interpreter regardless of qualifications, skills or ethics, and 34% said that any interpreter regardless of qualifications, skills or ethics is better than no interpreter we could assume that large numbers of Deaf people feel it is acceptable. However, to the question of whether agencies should send unaccredited interpreters to appointments, 71% of respondents said no.

So it seems that many Deaf people will accept less qualified or unaccredited interpreters if this is all they can get, but the majority believe agencies should not be putting them in the position of having to accept unaccredited interpreters.

AAD recommends that:

- a) Interpreter training include relevant aspects of financial and small business management;
- b) Agencies and employers need to develop incentives for para-professional interpreters to upgrade their skills to professional level;
- c) Deaf people consider not using unsuitable or insufficiently qualified interpreters; AAD needs to generate discussion about this in the Deaf community to raise awareness levels of the impact of this practice;
- d) Agencies should stop using unaccredited interpreters.

## **2. Knowing where to go to get an interpreter**

Until about 15 years ago, Deaf people went to their state Deaf Society if they needed an interpreter. Now they can get an interpreter from many different organisations: Deaf Societies, NABS, private businesses set up by interpreters, and some general interpreting services (for all languages) e.g. VITS. Some government departments or agencies (e.g. Centrelink), universities and TAFE colleges, have their own lists of interpreters that they contact directly, or they have a “preferred supplier” arrangement and get their interpreters

mostly from only one agency.

Depending on what the person wants an interpreter for, they often have to go to different agencies, e.g. if they want an interpreter for an appointment with their doctor, they contact NABS; if they are in a public hospital and they want an interpreter so they can communicate with the doctor, they ask the hospital to contact their interpreting supplier (which might be the Deaf Society, or it might be a private interpreting agency); if they have an accident late at night and are taken by ambulance to a public hospital emergency department, the hospital is supposed to contact the Deaf Society emergency interpreting service.

Is this confusing? Deaf people were asked if they know where to go or who to ask to get an interpreter. 60% said yes, 11% said no, and 19% said sometimes (11% did not answer this question). 60% of people knowing how to get an interpreter could be considered a fairly good result; however, 30% not knowing, or only knowing sometimes how to get an interpreter indicates there is still quite a high level of confusion in the community.

Some states have several agencies competing with each other to supply interpreters for the same appointment types. Other states still have basically only one supplier, the Deaf Society.

Deaf people were asked who supplies their interpreters.

79% said their Deaf Society;

67% said NABS;

37% said organizations that have their own list of interpreters;

25% said they book the interpreter directly as a freelance interpreter;

14% said a private agency;

7% said a general interpreting agency for all languages;

9% said the interpreter is supplied in some other way;

6% said they do not know who supplies the interpreter; and

5% did not answer this question.

(Multiple responses were allowed for this question.)

Would it be better to go back to the old days and go to the Deaf Society for all interpreting?

One third of respondents seem to think so. To the question of what type of service provision models they would prefer (multiple responses were allowed):

33% said they would prefer one state based agency for all interpreting in each state;

30% said they would prefer one national agency for all interpreting in Australia;

17% said they would prefer a few state based agencies for specific types of appointments;

14% said they would prefer a few national agencies for specific types of appointments;

11% said they would prefer lots of different agencies competing with each other;

9% said they would prefer something else, and suggestions included (quoted verbatim):

All network to a national monitoring body as to monitor professionalism & ethics & also does referral to the appropriate agency in each state.

AAD to monitor Ethics, Policy, protocol.

Plus all have standardised rules eg: protocols/payments/working conditions.

Deaf Relay Interpreters have own agency (cultural)

Number of agencies covering different types – I can choose. ASLIA list of freelance

I can contact direct.

Each agency but same ethics & rules as National.

Not competing, cooperative, but maybe diff ethos.

One agency for all health interpreting and one agency for all interpreting bookings in [state]

A monopoly ie 1 agency not good - either per State or Nationally;  
8% did not answer this question.

It seems that Deaf people would prefer fairly centralized forms of interpreting service provision. The least favoured model is for a lot of competing services, which is what is happening now in some states.

It is supposed to be a good thing to have competition because it is supposed to force suppliers to improve quality. But often the same interpreters work for many different agencies, and sometimes when an agency cannot fill an interpreting request they contract it out to another agency – and that agency contacts many of the same interpreters that the first agency has already contacted in an effort to fill the booking. So it does not matter much who supplies the interpreters, Deaf people still get the same interpreters. So it is questionable whether this competition between suppliers is actually improving quality of interpreting. Competition between suppliers also has other impacts, e.g. some suppliers charge less than others and/or pay interpreters more than others so it is easier to get interpreters for some situations than for others.

It is also supposed to be a good thing to have one central agency because this is supposed to make it easier and less confusing for consumers. But this means one agency has control over all aspects of consumers' interpreting needs. Is it a good thing for one organisation to have so much say in consumers' lives and so much control over who interprets for consumers and when?

In some states Deaf people can get an interpreter from a general interpreting agency – i.e. agencies that provide interpreters for all languages. These agencies usually do not know much about Auslan or the Deaf community, and they sometimes use unqualified or very new interpreters. There have also been reports that unethical and unprofessional interpreters who cannot get work with the Auslan interpreting agencies are able to get work with these general interpreting agencies.

It seems the answer may lie in a combination of a few types of services – e.g. perhaps a few nationally based services for specific types of appointments that require very specific skills such as health and legal appointments, with each state having a single “generalist” interpreting service for other types of appointments – i.e. what agencies call “community” interpreting, which includes interpreting for activities such as job interviews, home loan interviews at banks, counselling, parent and teacher interviews, public lectures etc.

AAD recommends that:

- a) options for models of interpreting service provision be investigated further, with all stakeholders included in consultations;
- b) since the same interpreters work for several different agencies, agencies should collaborate on issues of quality such as professional development and monitoring of competence and ethics.

### 3. Choice

How much say do consumers have about who interprets for them?

When a person goes to a doctor or a dentist or a hairdresser etc, if they do not like the doctor/dentist/ hairdresser, they do not have to go back again, they can go to a different one until they find one they like, and then they keep going back to that doctor/dentist/hairdresser.

Can Deaf people do this with interpreters?

They can do it sometimes with some agencies, but they cannot do it all the time with all agencies.

To have a choice about who will interpret for them, the most direct way is for the Deaf person to contact the agency and book the interpreter themselves. Deaf people were asked whether they do this. 35% said yes, 25% said no and 30% said sometimes (10% did not answer this question).

The 91 respondents (25%) who said no, were asked why and their reasons were:  
19% are not allowed (the agency will only accept bookings from whoever is paying for the interpreter, not from the Deaf person);  
21% did not know they could do this;  
18% do not know how to contact the agency;  
11% said it is not easy to contact the agency;  
11% are not confident enough to do this;  
35% are happy for the agency to decide which interpreter they should have; and  
24% did not say why.

When Deaf people were asked whether they get the interpreter they ask for, 43% said yes, 11% said no, 36% said sometimes (10% did not answer this question).

It is of concern to find that respondents are so disempowered when it comes to choice – only 35% regularly book their own interpreters and only 43% regularly get the interpreters they ask for. If we split the “sometimes” answers 50/50, this still means that only 50% book their own interpreters and only 61% get the interpreters they ask for.

It is interesting that the most common reason for not booking their own interpreter is that they are happy for the agency to decide which interpreter they should have. This could indicate that their agency does an excellent job of allocating the right interpreter to them, or it could also indicate disempowerment.

When the agency cannot supply the interpreter of choice, the Deaf consumer can either change their appointment time or they can accept a different interpreter. When accepting a different interpreter, 32% of respondents said the agency contacts them to discuss a suitable interpreter, 22% said the agency does not contact them (i.e. the agency decides which interpreter the consumer will have without any discussion with the consumer), and 29% said that some agencies contact them (17% of respondents did not answer this question).

In addition, only 22% of respondents said the agencies give them a list of interpreters that they can choose from. 51% said they are not given a list and 13% said they are sometimes given a list. (14% of respondents did not answer this question.)

Agencies that have interpreters on staff usually assign their staff interpreters before they will look at their freelance list. This means that if Deaf consumers request an interpreter who is a freelance the agency will usually not assign that interpreter if there is a staff interpreter available. This is because (a) the agency has to pay the staff interpreter whether or not the interpreter is actually working on an interpreting assignment, and (b) freelance interpreters are paid more per hour than staff interpreters. The agency charges the service provider the same fee, whether the interpreter is staff or freelance, and it is cheaper for them to use staff interpreters than freelance.

Agencies do better when it comes to confirming that an interpreter has been booked: 53% of respondents said the agency contacts them to confirm the booking, 13% said the agencies do not provide confirmation, and 17% said they sometimes do. (16% of respondents did not answer this question.)

However, even when the agency confirms that they have booked the chosen (or agreed upon) interpreter, the preferred interpreter does not necessarily turn up for the appointment: only 54% of respondents said the interpreter of choice usually turns up at the appointment. 29% said a replacement interpreter is often or sometimes sent. (17% did not answer this question.)

Moreover, when an agency sends a different interpreter to the appointment, they do not usually check first with the Deaf client to ensure that the alternative interpreter is acceptable. Only 28% of respondents said the agencies check first. 35% said the agencies do not check with them and 20% said they sometimes do. (17% of respondents did not answer this question.)

Many agencies, especially the Deaf Societies, will not allow Deaf clients to book an interpreter themselves. They require the service provider (i.e. the person or organization that is paying for the interpreter) to make the booking. In this situation the Deaf client can have a say about who the interpreter is by asking the service provider to request particular interpreters. However, if these interpreters are not available it becomes difficult for the Deaf person to have a say in the negotiations. Usually what happens is the agency decides which interpreter the client will have. AAD considers this to be inappropriate. Agencies should contact the Deaf person either directly or via the service provider to negotiate an acceptable interpreter.

Not all Deaf people are able to be fully independent and it may be appropriate for some agencies to decide which interpreter is most appropriate for their needs (e.g. a Deaf Society might provide other services to the person and may be aware of that person's situation and needs). But large numbers of Deaf people are quite independent and capable of making their own decisions and they should be consulted as a matter of course, not as a privilege or as an exception for those who are more assertive about their rights.

With the establishment of NABS (which pays more than other agencies) and private interpreting agencies, a new issue has arisen. It is becoming more common now for some interpreters to "tout for service" – i.e. they pressure the Deaf person to book them for their next appointment. 23% of respondents said they have experienced this kind of pressure in the past 12 months. This can be very uncomfortable and difficult for Deaf people if they are not happy with the interpreter and do not want to use them again. AAD considers this behaviour is unethical, and it should be reported to agencies, which should deal with the behaviour appropriately. This situation also highlights the need for Deaf people to become

better informed to help them deal assertively with this type of situation.

AAD recommends that:

- a) booking systems be restructured so that Deaf people have an active right to choose their interpreters;
- b) agencies actively and clearly inform Deaf clients that they can book their interpreters themselves and/or request their preferred interpreters;
- c) agencies ensure that when the preferred interpreters are not available, the Deaf person is consulted about alternatives;
- d) agencies provide clear information on how to contact them to book an interpreter, and ensure that contact methods are user friendly for Deaf clients;
- e) agencies provide a list of interpreters from whom the client can choose;
- f) alternatively, interpreters could register with a central registry and list there how they can be booked;
- g) agencies ensure that all clients are notified about the progress of their booking (e.g. still looking for an interpreter or not able to find one) and that the chosen or agreed upon interpreter has been booked;
- h) when the agency changes a booking and allocates a different interpreter, agencies contact the Deaf client to ensure that the replacement interpreter is acceptable;
- i) Deaf people should report unethical behaviour by interpreters and agencies should deal with it appropriately;
- j) More awareness raising activities be conducted for Deaf people to help them understand their rights and how to deal assertively with difficult situations.

#### **4. Booking systems**

For most agencies, anyone booking an interpreter is required to fill out a booking form and fax or post it to the agency. Some have online booking forms. NABS is the only agency that will allow bookings to be made over the phone, by email or SMS. This is because NABS is fully funded by the Australian Government and is free for all users, but other agencies need to know who is going to pay for the interpreter. Booking forms make it more complicated for everyone, and more difficult for some Deaf people to book interpreters themselves.

Usually bookings need to be made well in advance, especially if the Deaf person wants their interpreter of choice. The length of time required varies from one agency to another, and there is a perception that it is starting to increase, especially if a professional (level 3) interpreter is required. When asked how far ahead they usually need to book, the most common response was either a few days (22%) or two weeks (also 22%). Only 11% said they could get an interpreter with less than one day's notice. 16% said they can usually get an interpreter with one week's notice, 8% said they need to give 3 weeks notice, and 16% said they need to book more than 3 weeks ahead.

This is a problem for many situations, e.g. for job interviews or emergency meetings in the workplace. Deaf people also often have to wait much longer than a hearing person would for some things, e.g. an interview at Centrelink, because of the long booking lead time required by agencies.

Deaf people are often asked to change their appointment time to suit the agency or interpreter availability. When asked about this, 43% of respondents said the agencies do

not ask them to change their appointment time. 9% said they are usually asked to change their time and 34% said they are sometimes asked. Deaf people might be willing to do this but it is not always easy for them or for the person(s) they are meeting with, and means that arranging appointments with anyone is complicated, frustrating and time consuming. Even if they change their appointment time the agency will sometimes call close to the appointment time and say that they cannot supply an interpreter. So there is no option but to cancel the appointment because it is too late to contact another agency and fit in with *their* long advance booking time.

We asked Deaf people what they do in this situation.

38% said they cancel the appointment;

10% said they accept a non-accredited interpreter;

20% said they ask someone who can sign a bit to help them;

19% said they ask someone to take notes for them;

37% said they use pen and paper;

2% said they arrange real-time captioning;

29% said they muddle through with lipreading and speech;

15% said they ask NABS to provide an interpreter;

10% said they use other strategies, and most strategies involved asking a hearing family member to help;

13% did not answer this question.

(Multiple responses were allowed.)

Clearly Deaf people do not have good access to communication when they do many things, or they are missing out altogether on doing things that are important to them.

So how does a Deaf person get an interpreter at short notice when one is genuinely needed? NABS claims they are able to provide interpreters at relatively short notice – within a few days, or even only one day. Why is it possible for NABS to do this, but not for other agencies, particularly given that NABS and the other agencies essentially use the same interpreters? Is it because NABS pays interpreters more than other agencies do, so interpreters are more willing to work for NABS? Is it because other agencies that supply interpreters to NABS give priority to NABS bookings because they bring in more income than other bookings? Is it because the other agencies will only use their staff interpreters or a limited list of interpreters? Is it because NABS will use interpreters with a lower level of skills and/or ethics that other agencies will not employ, and/or because the agencies that supply interpreters to NABS will supply less skilled or ethical interpreters that they would not normally employ for their own service? Or is there some other reason? This needs more investigation.

There is also the question of how interpreters are allocated to bookings. Even if the interpreter is booked a long time ahead and the interpreter of choice is allocated, between then and the actual appointment, the agency may receive another request that has a higher priority in their procedures – e.g. if the interpreter is needed for a court case, he/she may be reallocated to the court appointment and a replacement interpreter is sent to the original appointment. Sometimes the agency will inform the Deaf person about this, but usually the Deaf person turns up to their appointment and finds they have a different interpreter. That this situation happens frequently was supported by responses to the question about whether the preferred interpreter turns up to the appointment: only 54% of respondents said the interpreter of choice usually turns up to the appointment. 29% said a replacement interpreter is often or sometimes sent. (17% did not answer this question.)

If an agency does not assign the requested interpreter, how do they decide which interpreter to allocate? Do they allocate the first available interpreter they can find? Do they contact friends or well-known interpreters first? It is known that many interpreters belong to the same church group; do bookings staff assign bookings to members of their church first? Or do they try to match the interpreter's skills to the Deaf person's needs? How do they know what the person's needs are? Do they have client profiles on their system with relevant information about the client's language and skill level needs? How do they collect this information? Is it information the Deaf person has told them or do they work it out for themselves based on information that the interpreters who have worked with the Deaf person give them?

When asked if they know how agencies make decisions about which interpreters to assign to their appointments, 42% of respondents said no, 26% said yes and 20% said they know this for some agencies. (13% of respondents did not answer this question.)

The 168 respondents (46%) who said yes or some agencies, were asked how they know. 20% said the agency asks them for the names of their preferred interpreters; 16% said they tell the agency which interpreters they prefer; 5% said someone who works at the agency has told them, and 2% said they know some other way. (9% of respondents did not answer this question. Multiple responses were allowed.)

It should be noted that NABS has a policy of asking Deaf people for their preferred interpreters. Other agencies will usually try to accommodate preferences if requests are specifically made. It seems that many Deaf people are not aware that they can make requests for specific interpreters. Since 42% of respondents said they do not know how the agencies allocate interpreters to their appointments, there seems to be a widespread practice of accepting what one is given.

AAD recommends that:

- a) booking systems be reviewed and made more flexible and user friendly;
- b) the inability of many agencies to provide interpreters at short notice be investigated and more flexible and efficient structures and practices introduced and provisions are made for situations where interpreters are needed at short notice;
- c) agencies clearly inform clients that they can request specific interpreters;
- d) agencies provide clear information for clients about how they allocate interpreters, and in what circumstances they reallocate interpreters to requests that have a higher priority.

## **5. Working conditions for interpreters – some impacts on the Deaf consumer.**

Interpreters are human and like all workers they need to be treated fairly. Fair pay, occupational health and safety and reasonable working conditions are as important for interpreters as for anyone else.

Most agencies now have similar working conditions for their interpreters, such as:

- for appointments of up to two hours, one interpreter can be booked but must be given a break after 1 hour;
- if breaks cannot be arranged then two interpreters must be booked if the

- appointment is longer than 1 hour;
- o for appointments longer than two hours, two interpreters must be booked.

Since there is a shortage of interpreters, sometimes agencies will send only one interpreter for longer bookings. This means that either (a) the proceedings have to be stopped while the interpreter has a break every hour, or (b) the Deaf person has to miss out on proceedings while the interpreter is having a break. This can be awkward for Deaf people, reduce their access to information and equal participation, and inconvenient for the service provider.

Almost half the respondents said they have experienced this type of situation. (46% said yes and 38% said no; 16% did not answer this question.)

Sometimes, despite the best of intentions, meetings run over time or lunch and tea breaks are shorter than planned. Some interpreters are flexible and do not mind having shorter breaks, especially when they are working in teams of two or more. But sometimes they are not willing to do this and complain, sometimes quite aggressively, to the Deaf person or to the service provider, about the demands upon them. This can be awkward for the Deaf person. When asked about their experiences in this type of situation, 42% of respondents said their interpreters are usually flexible, 7% said their interpreters are usually not flexible, and 30% said their interpreters are sometimes flexible and sometimes not.

In addition, Deaf people also need interpreting so they can network during breaks in meetings, and this is sometimes impossible if the interpreter is being overworked or not enough interpreters are engaged for the event.

It should be noted that occupational overuse syndrome is an issue for interpreters, more so for some than for others. Interpreters do need to have sufficient breaks. However, the needs of Deaf and hearing consumers are equally as important as the interpreter's needs. Interpreters need to be better trained in how to deal with these situations, and other strategies need to be developed. For example, for some types of appointments three rather than two interpreters should be used, and interpreters who are particularly susceptible to occupational overuse syndrome should not accept bookings for very long and "dense" (there is a lot of continuous interpreting) appointments.

There is also the question of who is responsible for ensuring interpreters have appropriate breaks. Some interpreters take this upon themselves as their own responsibility and remind the service provider or the Deaf person when they need a break. Some interpreters expect the Deaf person and/or the service provider to remember their needs, but not all Deaf people and service providers are consistent, sometimes they get involved in what is happening in the meeting and forget the interpreter's needs. Who should be responsible for ensuring interpreters have a break if and when they need it? Responses to this question were:

- 45% said the interpreter should be responsible;
- 27% said the meeting leader should be responsible;
- 25% said the Deaf person should be responsible;
- 19% said the interpreting agency should be responsible;
- 15% did not answer this question.

(Multiple responses were allowed.)

The answer seems to be that everyone involved should take some responsibility for this, but the interpreter should take the primary responsibility. This issue needs to be included in training/awareness programs for Deaf people, training for interpreters and booking agency staff, and information about it needs to be clearly communicated to meeting leaders.

Almost all agencies have a policy of 2 hour minimum bookings. This means that if an appointment will only take, say half an hour, the person paying still has to pay for 2 hours of interpreting. From the interpreter's and the agency's point of view, this policy is reasonable especially if there is travel involved in the appointment; it is not reasonable to expect an interpreter to spend, say half an hour travelling to an appointment, half an hour at the appointment, and half an hour travelling back from the appointment if they are only being paid for half an hour's work.

Video relay interpreting would help to solve this problem because it involves no travel and should allow for people to book and pay for only the time they actually use the interpreter.

The minimum 2 hour booking policy is notoriously abused by agencies and freelance interpreters. They insist that even if the interpreter is only required for half an hour, 2 hours must be paid for. However, since the interpreter is only needed for half an hour, they then assign the interpreter to another appointment after that half hour is finished – effectively charging twice for the interpreter's time. For short bookings, would it be fairer to charge for the time the interpreter is required plus travel time rather than the minimum 2 hour booking fee? When asked this question, 56% of respondents said yes and 24% said no. (20% did not answer this question.)

This issue needs to be investigated and a fairer minimum booking policy needs to be introduced.

AAD recommends:

- a) Training for interpreters, training/awareness for Deaf people, and information for hearing consumers needs to include issues of who is responsible for ensuring interpreters have appropriate breaks, and how to deal with the situation if breaks do not happen when needed;
- b) Interpreters be better trained in how to deal with situations where occupational overuse syndrome is likely to be an issue, and new strategies need to be developed. For example, for some types of appointments three rather than two interpreters should be used, and interpreters who are particularly susceptible to occupational overuse syndrome should not accept bookings for very long and "dense" (there is a lot of continuous interpreting) appointments;
- c) the practice of imposing a 2 hour minimum bookings be reviewed and a fairer and more flexible minimum booking policy be introduced;
- d) Video relay interpreting needs to be introduced into Australia.

## 6. Quality

Deaf people are now more aware of their rights to access services and to have competent interpreters, and more Deaf people now are gaining higher qualifications. This means that there is an increasing need for a higher level of skill and quality in interpreting. There are some excellent, highly skilled interpreters providing a very high quality service. However, their numbers are small and they tend to be in very high demand. There is a large pool of

interpreters whose qualifications have not kept up with Deaf people's skill level or expanding range of needs.

In addition, the way in which people become interpreters has changed. Fifteen to twenty years ago interpreters were mostly CODAs (hearing Children of Deaf Adults) or people who had worked in the Deaf community in other jobs for a long time. They could sign fluently and were familiar with Deaf culture before they became interpreters. Today many interpreters have not previously been much involved with the Deaf community. Many people now go to TAFE to learn Auslan and then do a TAFE interpreter's course; at the end of this course they receive NAATI level 2 accreditation. Their Auslan skills might be good, but interpreting is not just about putting English words into Auslan signs and vice versa. It is also about such things as understanding cultural contexts and relaying the message in culturally appropriate ways. Can interpreters who have had little ongoing involvement in the Deaf community do this to an acceptable standard?

As previously discussed under issue 1 above, 34% of respondents said any interpreter is better than none. Clearly large numbers of Deaf people are prepared to put up with poor quality interpreting rather than have no access. But if Deaf people continue to do this, interpreters have less incentive to improve their skills and qualifications. On the other hand, is it fair to expect Deaf people to go without access in order to put pressure on interpreters to improve their skills?

If they do not regularly work with interpreters, hearing people are not always aware of what is good quality interpreting and what is not, so the responsibility for being assertive and insisting on good quality interpreting usually falls on Deaf people. Would this be acceptable for other professions? For example, would it be acceptable to expect people to put up with poor quality service from doctors, dentists or hairdressers simply because they had no other choice, or to do without medical, dental or hairdressing services in order to put pressure on doctors, dentists and hairdressers to improve their service quality?

Even when interpreters have a good level of skill and qualification, they often do not have expertise or knowledge in more specialized areas, e.g. medical terms and conditions, technology, legal terms and the legal system. When asked whether their interpreters have the appropriate specialist knowledge or skills needed for the job, 45% of respondents said yes, 10% said no, and 33% said sometimes. (13% did not answer this question.)

In some situations a Deaf interpreter needs to be used to fill the gap when a hearing interpreter is inadequate, e.g. if the Deaf person is from another country and has a primary sign language that is not Auslan, or has a disability that complicates the communication.

Interpreters need to be better trained, and they need to have specialist training. Deaf relay interpreters also need to be well trained.

Unfortunately there are not enough training programs for interpreters. A major problem is that there are no national training or competency standards for interpreters; there is only the NAATI accreditation system. There is now some discussion, led by the Department of Education, Science and Training, about this situation for translators and interpreters in all languages, and AAD supports the introduction of a national training package for translators and interpreters under the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system. Since competent language skills are a necessity for interpreting, AAD also supports a national training package incorporating national competency standards for Languages Other Than

English (LOTE), including Auslan, under the VET system.

Academic training for interpreters at university level is also needed in addition to training in the VET system. Academic training should also include competency standards for practical interpreting skills.

Part of the problem also is that TAFE colleges and universities usually require a minimum number of enrolments before they will allow a course to go ahead and it can be difficult to get enough enrolments. Even when courses are available the quality of the course is sometimes questionable. It is important that interpreter trainers themselves are adequately skilled and qualified, and this is not always the case. One way to solve these problems may be for more nationally based courses using distance learning modules and employing only the most highly qualified trainers. All interpreters also need to have meaningful on-going involvement with the Deaf community, not just as an interpreter but also as an active participant in the life of the community.

An equally important issue is the quality of teaching in Auslan courses. Auslan is relatively new in the LOTE system, and it does not have a well-established body of highly trained and qualified teachers. Often people (both Deaf and hearing) teaching Auslan do not even have what could be considered the basic requirements – a Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment and Training, and a Diploma in Auslan. These teachers may be native users of Auslan (although not all are) but this does not necessarily equip them to formally teach the language; they must, for example, also have knowledge of and/or training in the linguistics of Auslan and the ability to teach it. All teachers of Auslan should be required to have appropriate qualifications and skills, and national competency standards need to be established on what these qualifications and skills should be.

There also needs to be more ongoing professional development for interpreters. When asked whether they think interpreters should be required to do regular professional development activities to upgrade their skills, 79% of respondents said yes and 6% said no. (15% did not answer this question.)

Some agencies do provide and require their interpreters to participate in professional development training but many agencies and employers do not. Agencies also do not usually consult with Deaf people on what type of professional development is needed, or involve them in this development.

AAD recommends that:

- a) interpreters need to have more training than they currently do; they also need to have specialist training for particular areas of interpreting;
- b) a national training package for translators and interpreters be introduced under the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system;
- c) a national training package incorporating national competency standards for Languages Other Than English (LOTE), including Auslan, be introduced under the VET system;
- d) academic training for interpreters also continues to be needed, and academic training should include competency standards for practical interpreting skills;
- e) new ways of delivering interpreter training programs be developed – e.g. the use of distance education using the most highly qualified trainers;
- f) interpreters be required, as part of their training and ongoing professional development, to have meaningful involvement with the Deaf community, not just as

- an interpreter but as an active participant in the life of the community;
- g) all teachers of Auslan be required to have appropriate qualifications and skills, and national competency standards be established on what these qualifications and skills should be;
  - h) interpreters be required to do a certain amount of professional development. Deaf people should be included in consultations on what type of professional development is needed, and they should be involved in this development.

## **7. Guarantee of supply**

Sometimes because interpreters are human, bookings are cancelled at the last minute. Usually the booking agency will try and find a replacement interpreter, which can mean the Deaf person gets an interpreter they do not know and have never worked with before, or prefer not to work with. Sometimes this works out well, sometimes it does not. Sometimes too the agency is not able to find a replacement, so the Deaf person has no option but to either cancel their appointment or attend it without an interpreter.

Because frequently interpreters have to be booked a number of weeks ahead (only 49% of respondents said they can get an interpreter within a week or less), if the agency cannot supply a replacement interpreter, Deaf people are sometimes in a situation of having to wait a very long time for important appointments. For example a booking for an appointment with Centrelink may need to be made 3 weeks in advance; if the interpreter is cancelled at the last minute, the Deaf person has to wait another 3 weeks for a new appointment, meaning that they have to wait for a total of 6 weeks.

Most agencies have a cancellation policy – i.e., if the clients cancel a booking within, say, 24 hours (for some agencies it is as long as three days) they still have to pay the full interpreting fee, or a percentage of it.

There is a view that if agencies are imposing this kind of cancellation fee then they have an obligation to guarantee that they will supply a suitable interpreter. When asked whether they agree with this view, 80% of respondents said yes, and 7% said no. (13% did not answer this question.)

There is also a view that agencies that have these cancellation policies should also compensate the Deaf person when their interpreter cancels. Interpreters may lose pay if the Deaf person cancels an appointment, but Deaf people also lose important things when the interpreter cancels. If interpreters and agencies expect to be compensated in this situation then Deaf people also should be compensated.

Respondents who said that agencies with cancellation policies should guarantee supply were also asked whether these agencies should compensate the Deaf person if they cannot supply a suitable interpreter. 65% of those who answered yes to the previous question said yes to this question and 27% said no. (8% did not respond to this question.)

Clearly, Deaf people see it as unreasonable for agencies to demand a cancellation fee if they do not guarantee supply. However, although the majority believe that these agencies should compensate them if they cannot supply a suitable interpreter, they are less certain about this.

There is no agency that provides this guarantee or compensation. AAD recommends that

agencies that have a cancellation policy should guarantee supply and provide compensation to clients when they cannot meet this guarantee.

The fact that pay rates vary between agencies also has an effect on guarantee of supply. Some interpreters cancel a job with one agency to do a job with a second agency because the second agency pays more. When respondents were asked whether they know of any occasions when an interpreter has cancelled a booking with them because the interpreter got a better paying assignment, 29% of respondents said yes and 51% said no. (20% did not answer this question.)

While a slight majority said they did not know of any occasion when this happened, the Deaf client does not always know this is the reason the interpreter cancelled, and the 29% who said they know of occasions when it happened is a significant number.

This situation seems to have become more common since the establishment of NABS, which pays much higher rates to freelance interpreters than any other agency. It also appears to be enabling NABS to find interpreters at short notice when other agencies cannot. It is questionable whether this actually benefits Deaf people. What is effectively happening is that some Deaf people are losing their interpreters to other Deaf people depending on which job is most lucrative for the interpreter.

It is AAD's view that the practice of canceling a booking to take a better paying one is unethical and agencies have a responsibility to remind their interpreters of this and to deal appropriately with interpreters found to be doing this. In addition Deaf people need to notify agencies when they become aware that their interpreter has done this.

AAD is also of the view that the practice by some agencies of using higher rates of pay as a means to attract interpreters in an environment where demand outstrips supply is not in the best interests of Deaf clients, and does not improve quality of service.

It is also AAD's view that some employers underpay interpreters and this exacerbates the situation. Interpreters, like other professionals, should be paid at a rate that is fair and reasonable for the type of skills and qualifications involved. National guidelines for rates of pay would be of benefit for all stakeholders.

AAD recommends that:

- a) agencies that have a cancellation policy should guarantee supply and provide compensation to clients when they cannot meet this guarantee;
- b) agencies remind interpreters that the practice of canceling a booking to take a better paying one is unethical; and that agencies deal appropriately with interpreters found to be doing this. In addition Deaf people need to notify agencies when they become aware that their interpreter has done this;
- c) pay rates be investigated, and all stakeholders consulted, with a view to developing industry-wide guidelines for appropriate rates of pay for interpreters, based on such criteria as qualifications, skills, and the nature of different types of appointments.

## **8. Consumer input**

There is only one agency that is known to provide any kind of regular forum for Deaf people to have input into how their interpreting service is provided, and this is limited to a reference group, with members chosen by the agency. Some agencies have regular or

occasional “interpreting information sessions”, however in practice these are often not about Deaf people having input into how the service is provided or the quality of the service, but rather about the agency educating consumers on what is available and how to work with interpreters.

Most interpreting services are organised as a business. The primary focus is on interpreters being paid enough to make a living and agencies making a profit. Quality of service is a secondary consideration. The Deaf point of view often is not the same as the agency’s or the interpreter’s point of view, and few agencies actively seek out the Deaf point of view.

Deaf people were asked whether agencies invite them to meetings or events so the agency can give the Deaf person information about their interpreting services. 30% of respondents said yes and 53% said no. (17% did not answer this question.) Similar responses (29% yes, 53% no, 18% not stated) were given for the related question as to whether agencies invite Deaf people to events so that they can tell the agency what they think of their interpreting service.

It is encouraging to see that some agencies are providing some kind of forum for Deaf people to have their say, but with the majority of Deaf respondents saying they are not invited to such forums, much more needs to be done. AAD is also aware that often Deaf people will not openly state their views at these forums; they need to be able to do this more anonymously. Perhaps agencies could be working more closely with AAD to provide forums in a way that allows Deaf people to have their say without fear or favour.

Some agencies give clients a feedback card for them to fill out and return to the agency. These cards are usually very brief and very general, asking broad questions such as “Did you understand the interpreter?” with simple yes/no response boxes.

When asked if they had been given feedback forms/cards in the past 12 months, 27% said yes and 54% said no. (19% did not answer this question). The 27% who said yes were asked whether they completed the card and sent it back to the agency. 79% said yes and 17% said no. (4% did not answer.) Of the 79% who returned the card, 87% said their feedback was positive and 13% said their feedback was negative. (6% did not answer. Multiple responses were allowed.)

So it seems that when agencies make it easy for Deaf people to give them feedback, most will take the opportunity to provide feedback and their feedback is most often positive.

Deaf people were asked whether agencies should be required to meet certain standards and practices. 68% said yes and 11% said no. (22% did not answer this question.)

Respondents were also asked who should develop these standards and practices and who should monitor the agencies’ compliance. Responses suggested a combination of AAD, ASLIA, agencies, NAATI and government.

AAD recommends that:

- a) agencies and AAD collaborate to provide forums in a way that allows Deaf people to have their say about interpreting services without fear or favour;
- b) agencies make it easy for Deaf clients to give them feedback on their interpreting services, e.g. by providing simple feedback cards;

- c) agencies, ASLIA and AAD collaborate on developing a self-regulatory industry code of practice and a compliance mechanism.

## 9. Cost

Interpreters need to make a living. They have a right to expect a reasonable salary/fee for their skills and services. Agencies need to cover their costs.

However, the charges for interpreting vary enormously. Different agencies charge different rates, and within the same agency the charges vary depending on the time of day; rates vary from around \$110 to \$270 for a minimum 2 hour booking for one interpreter. Only a portion of this is actually paid to the interpreter. The rest is retained by the agency. It does cost agencies money to run the service and these overheads, on top of the fee paid to the interpreter, need to be included in the fee charged; but some agencies appear to be charging rates much higher than is reasonable.

Deaf people were asked what they think about interpreting fees. 28% said the fees are about right, 1% said they are too low, and 52% said they are too high. (19% did not answer this question.)

The fact that a significant number of respondents (28%) said the fees are about right could indicate that many Deaf people understand that interpreters should be fairly paid and agencies need to cover costs.

Given that most people, most of the time could be said to think most things are too expensive, we could probably expect that the majority would say, as they did, that the fees are too high. But Deaf people do not usually have to pay these fees themselves – service providers, government agencies etc pay the fees.

However, the high fees inflate the true cost of interpreting and this has various flow-on impacts on Deaf people. For example, if a Deaf person needs an interpreter for some work related activities their employer may be willing to pay for the interpreter if charges are reasonable, but cannot afford the high rates charged by agencies. Some assertive and well connected Deaf people are able to get around this problem by directly contacting freelance interpreters they know and asking them to accept bookings on a direct freelance basis which is much cheaper than the agency fees, but many Deaf people are not able to do this.

Some agencies, especially some of the Deaf Societies, provide some free interpreting services for some situations, e.g. funerals, so there is some argument in favour of charging higher fees to cross-subsidise situations where they cannot charge a fee. However, many agencies do not provide free services but still charge very high fees – and they often cite the Deaf Societies' high fees as justification for their own high fees.

The discussion paper suggested that Deaf people might be better off if Deaf Societies stopped providing free services and instead charged lower rates for all interpreting, thus putting pressure on other agencies to also charge more reasonable rates. However, this suggestion was not popular with Deaf people: when asked if they agreed with it, 28% of respondents said yes and 53% said no. (19% did not answer this question.)

However, because of the adverse impact of high fees, AAD believes the situation needs to

be investigated further and other options for reducing fees need to be developed, e.g. services that are currently provided free could be provided for a minimum cost recovery fee.

Agencies also usually charge the same rate regardless of the interpreter's qualification level, but they often pay the interpreters different rates, i.e. they pay a para-professional (level 2) interpreter less than they pay a professional (level 3) but they charge the same rate for both. This also leads to a false impression of the high cost of interpreting.

Since the quality of interpreting varies between the different qualification levels, should agencies charge different rates for different qualification levels? When asked this question, 64% of respondents said yes and 21% said no. (16% did not answer the question.)

There seems to be a view among at least some agencies that this would encourage people to use only the cheaper para-professional level interpreters. However, AAD is of the view that standards should be developed setting out which qualification level should be used for various interpreting situations and agencies should comply with these standards – and in the process, quote these standards to clients who try to use lower qualified interpreters when a higher qualification is required.

It is also AAD's view that this would help give a more accurate picture of the true cost of interpreting, and that it would also help give interpreters an incentive to improve their qualifications and skills.

AAD recommends that:

- a) agencies that charge high fees should reduce these fees;
- b) the practice by Deaf Societies of providing some types of services free be investigated and new options (other than using high fees to cross subsidise these types of services) be developed, e.g. services that are currently provided free could be provided for a minimum cost recovery fee; this investigation should include extensive discussions with the Deaf community;
- c) standards be developed setting out which qualification level should be used for various interpreting situations and agencies should comply with these standards – and in the process, quote these standards to clients who try to use lower qualified interpreters when a higher qualification is required.

## **10. Complaints and regulation**

Agencies usually have a process for clients to follow if they are not happy with the service. Usually a complaints process means the client should first let the interpreter know what the problem is and what they would like the interpreter to do to fix the problem. If the interpreter does not fix it, the client can then complain to their manager, and the manager is supposed to fix it, and so on. This is the general principle of all complaints processes.

AAD is aware that many Deaf people do not know how to complain and not all agencies actively inform Deaf consumers of their complaints process. To find out how widespread the problem is Deaf people were asked if they know how to make a complaint. A goodly majority of 61% said yes. However, a significant number, 27%, said no. (12% of respondents did not answer this question.)

Even if they do know how to complain, many Deaf people are not comfortable about

complaining because the process usually means the interpreter is told who complained. Because the number of interpreters is small the Deaf person often has to continue to work with the same interpreters and it can be difficult if the interpreters know the Deaf person has made a complaint about them. It is especially difficult for Deaf people to complain about interpreting services in small cities and regions where there are only a few interpreters.

When asked if they had made a complaint in the past 12 months, 29% of respondents said yes and 59% said no. (13% did not answer this question.)

While a 29% yes response indicates that services need to be improved, this was not the purpose of the question. The purpose was to find out how well complaints processes meet the needs of those Deaf people who need to use them.

The 215 respondents (59%) who said they had not made a complaint in the past 12 months were asked why not. Responses were:

53% said they had not needed to make a complaint;

11% said they do not know how to make a complaint;

16% said the complaint process is hard for them to use;

7% said they are frightened to make a complaint;

15% gave other reasons, which included (quoted verbatim):

Because I am only one complaint. Will they believe me?

If I complain then other interpreters won't ask for [i.e. interpret for] me.

I'm getting tired of complaining.

Feel it's not going to make a difference as there is no process set up to go through complaint requirement.

Who is the right direct person to make the complaints in each agency? As don't know how the agency runs as no workshops ever provided in our town or lack of getting information from them.

Do not need interpreters often.

Can't be bothered – time consuming!

If I complain, reduce number of interpreters available to me.

They don't usually do anything about it!!

Don't have any problems.

The community is small, just about everyone knows each other and almost certainly can track the complainant. No proper governing body is appropriate in [state] to complain against the major service provider.

Extra time to expression out into words. Prefer to film face signs so clearly specific.

No neutral organisation available.

Gets ignored.

Because [organization] was powerful.

I made a note not to use this interpreter.

I am very happy with their services.

12% did not answer this question.

(Multiple responses were allowed.)

While slightly more than half of those who had not made a complaint had not needed to make one, a large number have issues with the complaints process, some having more than one issue. The major problem seems to be that complaints processes are hard for Deaf people to use and this was also indicated in some of the comments. Comments also indicate that because of the small nature of the community and the limited number of

interpreters, there needs to be a complaints process that allows Deaf people anonymity when complaining.

There are concerns also that when Deaf people do complain, their complaints are not always followed up and nothing is done about the problem. These concerns were supported when the 106 respondents (29%) who said they had made a complaint were asked what had happened with it.

45% said their complaint was followed up and they were happy with the response;  
22% said their complaint was followed up but they were not happy with the response;  
11% said their complaint was not followed up;  
12% said their complaint was made recently and they were awaiting a response;  
9% did not answer this question.

Excluding the 12% of complaints that were made recently, although the majority of complaints (67%) were followed up, less than half of complainants were happy with the response and a significant number (33%) were either not followed up or the complainant was not happy with the response. Given that complaints processes are meant to resolve clients' issues, this would seem to be a very high rate of dissatisfaction with complaints processes for Deaf clients.

Since there is no regulation of interpreting services Deaf people have nowhere to take their complaints if the agency will not do anything about the problem or if the Deaf person is not satisfied with the response.

There is also no standard system for monitoring interpreters' ethics and no way to enforce the code of ethics – it is up to the agencies to monitor their own interpreters' compliance with the code of ethics. But most interpreters work alone most of the time. How does the agency monitor their competence and compliance?

AAD recommends that:

- a) complaints processes be made more user friendly, agencies provide clearer information to Deaf consumers about complaints processes, and response rates and client satisfaction with resolutions be improved;
- b) the feasibility of establishing an impartial complaints mechanism/s be investigated – e.g. via AAD or a national panel comprised of interpreters, consumers and agency representatives;
- c) mechanisms for monitoring interpreters' competence and compliance be investigated and developed, possibly as a collaboration between agencies, AAD and ASLIA. This could be included in an industry standards and code of practice.

## **New ways of thinking**

There have been many changes to the level of demand for Auslan interpreting services, and the burden on supply seems to be increasing. In some ways there has also been a change in the way services are supplied, but this change has mainly been in the number of agencies providing interpreters and the number of organisations that have their own lists of interpreters for direct bookings for their own needs. The way in which people become interpreters has also changed.

Other than these changes, the way that services are supplied, and the issues and

problems have remained largely the same, with some new issues emerging.

There are a number of areas in relation to supply that clearly call for agencies, interpreters, Deaf people and funding bodies to begin thinking in new ways and come up with new solutions to problems old and new, and new models of supply. The numbers of interpreters have increased, but most agencies use the same pool of interpreters so although the increased competition between agencies should mean an increase in quality and more competitive charges, this has not necessarily happened. It has, however, brought other problems.

More efficient and effective ways need to be developed to use the limited number of available interpreters; to provide training and professional development to improve numbers of interpreters and quality of service; to provide incentives for interpreters to continually upgrade their skills etc; and this needs to be done without increasing costs – charges for interpreting are already too high. Deaf people need to be included in the process of developing new ways of thinking about and supplying interpreting. Their perspective has largely been excluded to date, and it is time to change this.

Many people believe that video remote interpreting will provide a viable answer to many of the current problems, and AAD is continuing to try and find ways to bring video relay and video remote interpreting services to the Australian Deaf community. But technology is not the only answer. Video remote interpreting is not suitable for all interpreting situations.

The Australian Government is beginning to recognise the need to fund interpreting services and has provided funding to set up NABS and the Auslan for Employment Program. However, there are many other areas of need that government has yet to address. Government also needs to understand the impact that these funding programs are having on other types of interpreting need, and the importance of a more co-ordinated approach to the whole interpreting matrix.

Agencies, interpreters, Deaf people, governments and service providers who pay for interpreters need to work together to explore workable solutions to the problems. AAD and ASLIA have agreed to organize a national summit early in 2008 to try to get discussion and co-operative working partnerships started and we hope that the summit and its outcomes and plans for future action will be well supported by all stakeholders.

## **Recommendations**

Interpreter training:

- a) Interpreters need to have more training than they currently do; they also need to have specialist training for particular areas of interpreting.
- b) Needs to include relevant aspects of financial and small business management.
- c) Training for interpreters (and training/awareness for Deaf people, and information for hearing consumers) needs to include issues of who is responsible for ensuring interpreters have appropriate breaks, and how to deal with the situation if breaks do not happen when needed.
- d) Interpreters need to be better trained in how to deal with situations where occupational overuse syndrome is likely to be an issue, and new strategies need to be developed. For example, for some types of appointments three rather than two interpreters should be used, and interpreters who are particularly susceptible to occupational overuse

syndrome should not accept bookings for very long and “dense” (there is a lot of continuous interpreting) appointments.

- e) A national training package for translators and interpreters needs to be introduced under the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system.
- f) A national training package incorporating national competency standards for Languages Other Than English (LOTE), including Auslan, needs to be introduced under the VET system.
- g) Academic training for interpreters also continues to be needed, and academic training should include competency standards for practical interpreting skills.
- h) New ways of delivering interpreter training programs need to be developed – e.g. the use of distance education using the most highly qualified trainers.
- i) Interpreters should be required, as part of their training and ongoing professional development, to have meaningful involvement with the Deaf community, not just as an interpreter but as an active participant in the life of the community.
- j) All teachers of Auslan should be required to have appropriate qualifications and skills, and national competency standards need to be established on what these qualifications and skills should be.
- k) Interpreters should be required to do a certain amount of professional development. Deaf people should be included in consultations on what type of professional development is needed, and they should be involved in this development.

Incentives for interpreters to upgrade skills:

- a) Agencies and employers need to develop incentives for para-professional interpreters to upgrade their skills to professional level – e.g. more differentiation in the rates of pay for different levels of qualification.
- b) Deaf people need to consider not using unsuitable or insufficiently qualified interpreters; AAD needs to generate discussion about this in the Deaf community to raise awareness levels of the impact of this practice.
- c) Agencies should stop using unaccredited interpreters.

Models for supply of services:

- a) Options for models of interpreting service provision should be investigated further, with all stakeholders included in consultations.
- b) Since the same interpreters work for several different agencies, agencies should collaborate on issues of quality such as professional development and monitoring of competence and ethics.

Deaf people’s right to have a choice:

- a) Booking systems need to be restructured so that Deaf people have an active right to choose their interpreters.
- b) Agencies need to actively and clearly inform Deaf clients that they can book their interpreters themselves and/or request their preferred interpreters.
- c) Agencies need to ensure that when the preferred interpreters are not available, the Deaf person is consulted about alternatives.
- d) Agencies need to provide clear information on how to contact them to book an interpreter, and ensure that contact methods are user friendly for Deaf clients.
- e) Agencies should provide a list of interpreters from whom the client can choose.
- f) Alternatively, interpreters could register with a central registry and list there how they can be booked.
- g) Agencies should ensure that all clients are notified about the progress of their booking (e.g. still looking for an interpreter or not able to find one) and that the chosen or

- agreed upon interpreter has been booked.
- h) When the agency changes a booking and allocates a different interpreter, agencies should contact the Deaf client to ensure that the replacement interpreter is acceptable.
  - i) Deaf people should report unethical behaviour by interpreters and agencies should deal with it appropriately.
  - j) More information needs to be provided to Deaf people to help them understand their rights and how to deal assertively with difficult situations.
  - k) Video relay interpreting needs to be introduced into Australia.

#### Booking systems:

- a) Booking systems need to be reviewed and made more flexible and user friendly.
- b) The inability of many agencies to provide interpreters at short notice needs to be investigated and more flexible and efficient structures and practices introduced and provisions are made for situations where interpreters are needed at short notice.
- c) Agencies should clearly inform clients that they can request specific interpreters.
- d) Agencies should provide clear information for clients about how they allocate interpreters, and in what circumstances they reallocate interpreters to requests that have a higher priority.
- e) The practice of imposing a 2 hour minimum bookings be reviewed and a fairer and more flexible minimum booking policy be introduced.

#### Guarantee of supply:

- a) Agencies that have a cancellation policy should guarantee supply and provide compensation to clients when they cannot meet this guarantee.
- b) Agencies need to remind interpreters that the practice of canceling a booking to take a better paying one is unethical; and agencies should deal appropriately with interpreters found to be doing this.
- c) Deaf people need to notify agencies when they become aware that their interpreter has cancelled a booking to take a better paying one elsewhere.
- d) Pay rates need to be investigated, and all stakeholders consulted, with a view to developing industry-wide guidelines for appropriate rates of pay for interpreters, based on such criteria as qualifications, skills, and the nature of different types of appointments.

#### Input from consumers:

- a) Agencies and AAD should collaborate to provide forums in a way that allows Deaf people to have their say about interpreting services without fear or favour.
- b) Agencies could make it easy for Deaf clients to give them feedback on their interpreting services, e.g. by providing simple feedback cards.
- c) Agencies, ASLIA and AAD should collaborate on developing a self-regulatory industry code of practice and a compliance mechanism.

#### Fees:

- a) Some agency fees need to be reduced.
- b) The practice by Deaf Societies of providing some types of services free should be investigated and new options (other than using high fees to cross subsidise these types of services) should be developed, e.g. services that are currently provided free could be provided for a minimum cost recovery fee; this investigation should include extensive discussions with the Deaf community.
- c) Standards should be developed setting out which qualification level should be used for various interpreting situations and agencies should comply with these standards – and

in the process, quote these standards to clients who try to use lower qualified interpreters when a higher qualification is required.

Complaints and monitoring:

- a) Complaints processes need to be made more user friendly.
- b) Agencies need to provide clearer information to Deaf consumers about complaints processes.
- c) Response rates and client satisfaction with resolutions need to be improved.
- d) The feasibility of establishing an impartial complaints mechanism/s e.g. via AAD or a national panel comprised of interpreters, consumers and agency representatives should be investigated.
- e) Mechanisms for monitoring interpreters' competence and compliance should be investigated and developed, possibly as a collaboration between agencies, AAD and ASLIA. This could be included in an industry standards and code of practice.
- f) Agencies make it easy for Deaf clients to give them feedback on their interpreting services.

References:

Orima Research (for) Department of Family and Community Services, Supply and Demand for Auslan Interpreters across Australia, January 2004.