



## Position on NABS

### Background

The National Auslan Interpreter Booking and Payment Service (NABS) began operating early in 2005. It provides Auslan interpreters for Deaf people for private health appointments. It is fully funded by the Department of Families, Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

NABS is in some ways different to other Auslan interpreting services. It is free for the user (both the Deaf user and the hearing user). It is available nationally. It allows the Deaf consumer to choose their interpreter and to book their own interpreter. It provides a wider range of contact/booking methods.

Deaf Australia asked our members and other people in the Deaf community about their experiences of NABS. Does it work well for them? What works well? What needs to be improved? This position paper is largely based on their responses to this survey. It is also informed by an earlier, 2006-2007, survey and position paper about interpreting generally, *Position Paper on the Supply and Demand for Auslan Interpreting: the Deaf Perspective, November 2007*.

### Issues

#### **Are Deaf people happy with the NABS service?**

Of the 62 people who responded to our survey, 98% said they were happy with the NABS service when they used it and 92% said they were happy with the service from the NABS booking staff.

#### **Is it easy for Deaf people to get the interpreters they want?**

When asked, *Was it easy to get an interpreter you wanted for your appointments?* 87% of those who responded to our NABS survey said yes, 10% said sometimes, and 3% said no.

#### **Do Deaf people in fact get the interpreters they ask for?**

When asked, *Did you get the interpreters you wanted when you asked for them?* 77% of those who responded to our NABS survey said yes, 15% said sometimes, and 8% said no.

Although the number of respondents was not large, responses to these questions indicate that there is a high level of satisfaction with the NABS service. This has also been Deaf Australia's experience with anecdotal information – Deaf people generally seem to be happy with NABS although there are some issues that need attention, as outlined later in this document.

#### **What booking methods do Deaf people prefer?**

When asked how they normally book an interpreter with NABS,

29% said online  
23% said TTY  
28% said Fax  
59% said SMS  
29% said email  
Multiple responses were allowed.

So the preferred method seems to be by SMS. It is a Deaf Australia observation that most Deaf people seem to have mobile phones and use SMS regularly and the use of older communication methods such as TTY and fax is declining.

One respondent commented that they asked NABS to use TTY to contact them but NABS used voice calls which lead to problems for the Deaf person.

### **What works well, what needs to be improved?**

Our NABS survey asked respondents to tell us about good experiences they have had with NABS and bad experiences. Several general themes were identified in respondents' comments.

#### ***Most people are generally happy with the NABS service***

58% of respondents commented that they are generally happy with the service, and 43% said they had not had any bad experiences.

Several people said they hope the service will continue.

#### ***Quick response times***

Many respondents commented that the response times are good and NABS has been able to provide them with an interpreter at short notice.

However, a few respondents said that NABS took too long to let them know they had booked their interpreter, and on some occasions NABS has not let the Deaf person know the interpreter could not come to the appointment.

#### ***Deaf people get the interpreters of their choice***

Several people commented they appreciate the fact that they are able to choose their interpreters and they usually get the interpreters they want, and that NABS usually lets them know who their interpreter will be.

However, some respondents also said that sometimes the interpreter of choice is not available and sometimes no interpreter is available.

#### ***Quality of interpreters***

While a few respondents said that their interpreters have been very good, some said their interpreters were not sufficiently qualified or competent.

This was a theme that emerged strongly in our 2006-07 survey about interpreting generally. There is concern that the quality of interpreting needs to be improved, interpreters need more and ongoing training and incentives to upgrade their skills. This is discussed in greater detail in Deaf Australia's position paper on interpreting (2007).

#### ***Interpreters' punctuality and clothing***

Several respondents said their interpreters were late for appointments or did not turn up at all, and one respondent said that NABS had not let them know the interpreter would not be coming after all, leaving them waiting and anxious in the doctor's waiting room.

Some respondents also commented on interpreters' clothing. Generally interpreters are expected to wear plain colours that show their skin clearly. For the majority of interpreters this means plain dark colours. Light colours and patterns make it more difficult to see the interpreter's hands. One respondent said their interpreter was inappropriately dressed in clothes with spots, others said they would prefer some variety in the colours that interpreters wear – they would like to see other colours like dark blue or brown instead of black all the time.

The NABS survey also asked what NABS can do to improve their services and several themes emerged from respondents' comments:

***Keeping the Deaf person informed***

Deaf people expect NABS to let them know if their interpreter cancels. NABS needs to ensure that they do this.

Response times are also important. Although several people commented that the response times are good, others commented that they would like NABS to let them know earlier that they have booked an interpreter for them.

***Make a register of interpreters available***

Although Deaf people are able to choose which interpreters they want, this is not always easy for them to do because they do not necessarily know which interpreters they can choose from. Many respondents said they would like NABS to make a list of interpreters available, with names and photos. Photos are important for Deaf people because they remember faces more than names.

This is an issue that Deaf Australia has discussed with NABS on several occasions since NABS was established. NABS had reasons for not making such a register available, so in an effort to help, Deaf Australia decided to put a register of all interpreters on our own website so that Deaf people would at least have an idea of which interpreters are working in their area. However, this has not worked well – many interpreters have chosen not to register on our website, and the site does not show whether they are registered with NABS.

Deaf Australia believes it is time now for NABS to move beyond the issues that were preventing them providing a register and take this on themselves.

***Improve the number and quality of interpreters***

More interpreters are needed.

NABS needs to ensure that interpreters are reliable and turn up to appointments on time and are appropriately dressed.

Although there are some excellent and highly qualified interpreters, there are large numbers of interpreters who need to upgrade their skills and participate in ongoing training and professional development.

NAATI has recently introduced a system for revalidation of interpreters, Interpreters who are accredited from July 2007 are now expected to revalidate their accreditation every three years – they must work a minimum number of hours as an interpreter and participate in professional development activities. Interpreters who were accredited before July 2007 are not required to revalidate their accreditation but can elect to do so. Many long-standing interpreters are opting in to revalidation, but many are not. In an effort to encourage all interpreters to opt in to revalidation, the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ASLIA) has introduced a program that asks organisations to commit to employing only those

interpreters who have opted in. Deaf Australia participates in this program as we believe it is important to support efforts to improve quality of interpreting. It is our view that NABS also should commit to it and not employ interpreters who do not revalidate their accreditation.

***Extend NABS coverage to private hospitals and public health services***

NABS does not currently provide interpreters for private hospitals or public health services. This means that Deaf people usually are not able to have an interpreter if they are a patient at a private hospital. Public health services will provide interpreters but this tends to be erratic, they use different suppliers, not NABS and often the Deaf person is not able to have their interpreter of choice. This can lead to situations where the Deaf person has the same interpreter for all their health appointments but when they arrive at the hospital they must change to a different interpreter or have no interpreter at all. When a person is ill this can be very stressful and distressing.

It would be to everyone's benefit if all health interpreting, both private and public, were provided by the one health interpreting service.

***Videophones***

Several respondents said they would like to be able to contact NABS to book interpreters by videophone.

All of the current contact methods are English text based. Deaf people prefer Auslan, which is a visual language. They want to be able to communicate with NABS in Auslan via videophone.

***Allow hearing partners to make interpreter bookings for their Deaf partner***

This was suggested by one respondent and Deaf Australia sees no reason to disallow this; we believe it should at least be discussed.

***NABS should not take it upon themselves to inform doctors/receptionists that the Deaf person is bringing an interpreter, the deaf person is capable of doing that themselves***

It seems that NABS regularly contacts doctors/receptionists to let them know an interpreter will accompany the Deaf person to their appointment. For some Deaf people this might be appropriate, however, for many it is not – they are quite capable of doing this themselves and it is presumptuous and patronising of NABS to assume they should do it for them. Some respondents raised this issue and objected to this practice very strongly.

***Consult with Deaf customers***

There was a comment that NABS needs to listen more to their Deaf customers.

NABS does have a reference group which includes a few Deaf people, including a representative from Deaf Australia. However, NABS does not always take on board and act on comments that Deaf people make. One example has been the following theme:

***NABS should not expand its services into other non-health interpreting areas***

Deaf Australia is aware that for some time now NABS has been providing interpreters for non-health appointments on an ad hoc fee for service basis. We object to this practice for several reasons and have previously raised this with NABS and the Department. However, to our knowledge this practice is continuing and several respondents to the survey said NABS should not do this.

Essentially, Deaf Australia objects to this practice because it undercuts other unfunded interpreting service providers and is therefore anti-competitive, it is confusing for Deaf

people, and it does nothing to address the underlying problems that are leading people to ask NABS for interpreters for non-health appointments.

Several respondents did say they want a fully funded service similar to NABS for other areas of interpreting (e.g., legal services, education), and Deaf Australia agrees that this is needed. However, this is different to the current NABS practice of providing fee for service interpreting.

Deaf Australia believes that either:

- a) if NABS is to continue providing interpreters for non-health appointments on a fee for service basis, then other, non-NABS, interpreting services that provide fee for service interpreting should also be funded; or
- b) all interpreting should be fully funded and provided either by NABS or a combination of national fully funded agencies.

### ***Privacy***

The Deaf community is a small community and Deaf people regularly work with the same small pool of interpreters. This brings with it greater access for interpreters to Deaf people's personal information. Like other organisations providing services to the Deaf community, NABS needs to have in place stringent compliance with the Privacy Act to safeguard Deaf people's privacy.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Concerted efforts need to be made to increase the number of qualified interpreters available and to improve the quality of interpreting.
2. Some fine tuning of NABS practices are needed.
3. NABS should make a register of interpreters available to Deaf consumers to assist them to make choices.
4. NABS should be expanded to cover all health situations, private and public.
5. NABS must cease providing fee for service interpreting for non-health situations. The Department should consult on this issue and develop a more appropriate solution to the need for interpreting in non-health situations.