

GUIDE TO DEAFBLIND COMMUNICATION ACCESS



Deafblind communication access requires competencies beyond standard sign language interpreting, with communication tailored to the individual's sensory profile, preferences, and access needs. Effective access centers on autonomy, environmental mediation, and clear communication.

Depending on the nature of the interaction, deafblind individuals may require different types of support. Support Service Providers (SSPs) and sign language interpreters serve distinct, non-interchangeable roles, and both may be appropriate in certain situations.

Sign Language Interpreter

An individual who interprets in sign language effectively, accurately and impartially, both receptively and expressively, using specialized vocabulary. It is best practice to secure interpreters who are nationally certified through the [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. \(RID\)](#) and qualified to interpret in requested setting.

When Interpreters Are Needed

- Complex, detailed, fast-paced communication (e.g., meetings, education)
- Important information, decision-making, or risk (e.g., financial, legal, or medical settings)

Role of Sign Language Interpreters

Sign language interpreters provide language access between parties and must maintain clear professional boundaries.

Focus: Accurate and impartial interpretation

Role: Language conduit between parties

Consumer Preference: Language, touch, and positioning preferences must always be confirmed with the deafblind individual

Standards: Must adhere to the RID Code of Professional Conduct (CPC)

Ensuring Communication Access

To support effective, collaborative communication access, it is best practice to request an interpreter skilled in working with deafblind individuals. An experienced deafblind interpreter should understand modifications for varying degrees of vision and hearing loss and be skilled in incorporating environmental information and orientation cues.

Deafblind individuals may have preferred interpreters; honoring these preferences is considered a best practice.

↳ The **New Jersey Department of Human Services'** Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (**DDHH**) is a resource for identifying certified interpreters in NJ with deafblind experience.

It is essential to identify the specific communication needs and preferred modalities of the deafblind individual in advance (e.g., close vision, tactile, touch systems). Requesting interpreters with experience in similar settings may also be beneficial, as familiarity with the subject matter and terminology can improve accuracy and efficiency.

Depending on the length and complexity of the meeting, as well as the communication method being used, two (2) interpreters may be required. Tactile interpreting, in particular, is physically and cognitively demanding; therefore, interpreters typically work in teams and rotate approximately every twenty (20) minutes to maintain quality and reduce fatigue.

Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI) may also be considered when securing interpreter services for a deafblind individual.

- A CDI is a deaf or hard of hearing professional who has specialized training and certification through the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (**RID**).
- CDIs are experts in visual-gestural communication, cultural mediation, and adapting language to meet diverse communication needs.

Deafblind Interpreting and Communication

- **Close Vision:** To support the use of residual vision, the interpreter sits or stands within the individual's preferred visual field, taking lighting and glare into consideration. The interpreter typically uses a more compact signing space, clearer signing, and a slower pace as preferred by the deafblind individual.
- **Tracking:** The deafblind individual uses residual vision while lightly holding one or both of the interpreter's wrists or hands to keep the signs within visual field and regulate the pace of communication.
- **Tactile Sign Language:** The deafblind individual places hands on top of the interpreter's hands to feel signs, commonly using American Sign Language (ASL) or other signed languages.
- **Haptics:** A standardized system for conveying visual, environmental, and social information, as well as personal reactions and feedback through touch signals on the body.
- **Protactile (PT):** An emerging communication approach developed by the deafblind community that uses touch to communicate and explore the world. PT uses touch on the body (such as the shoulders, arms, and legs) rather than just only the hands, thereby allowing for continuous feedback, and environmental information, and social communication.

Sign Language Interpreters are expected to adhere to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (**RID**) Code of Professional Conduct (**CPC**). A grievance can be made to RID if there is a concern about an interpreter who has violated the CPC.

Support Service Providers (SSPs)

A provider who serves as a connection between an individual who has a combined loss of vision and hearing and the surrounding environment.

Role of Support Service Providers (SSPs)

SSPs are trained professionals who provide access to support deafblind individuals, facilitating independence by providing visual and environmental information, human guide services, and brief casual communication exchanges (spoken and or signed). SSP services are provided one-on-one in home and community settings.

Focus: Environmental information, human guide services and brief, casual communication exchanges	Communication: Social communications always respecting the language, touch, and positioning preferences of the deafblind individual; no formal interpreting
Role: Access provider	Target Audience: Individuals with combined hearing and vision loss

Through the access provided by SSPs, deafblind individuals are better able to:

- Make informed decisions
- Communicate effectively
- Engage safely in the community
- May also assist with community tasks activities, such as shopping, errands, and social events, errands, and transportation

While SSPs assist with casual communication, SSPs do not provide interpreting in formal or complex situations. SSPs are not caregivers or sign language interpreters. The relationship between the SSP and the deafblind individual is a partnership based on mutual trust, respect, and clear communication.

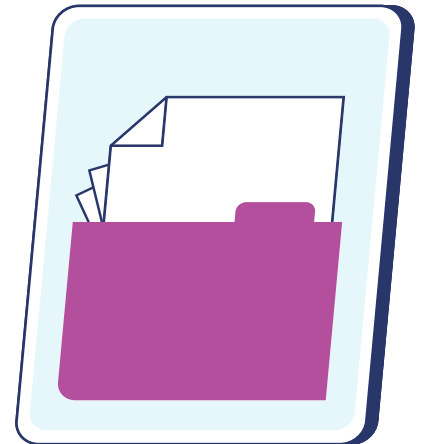
SSPs and Interpreters: Distinct Yet Complementary Roles

Interpreters	SSPs
Work primarily in formal communication settings.	Provide broader home and community access, including provision of environmental information, safe navigation, and everyday social communication.
Work with individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, and deafblind.	Work exclusively with individuals who are deafblind.
Education is provided through colleges and universities.	Training is typically provided through SSP programs and lived experience.
May hold state and national certifications and licensure.	State and national credentials not required.
May work with individuals, groups, or audiences.	Work with one deafblind individual at a time.
Maintain confidentiality and impartiality.	

Effective deafblind communication access is achieved through individualized supports that respect the deafblind individual's communication preferences, autonomy, safety, and full participation in community life.

Resources:

- [DDHH Best Practices for Communication Access](#)
- [New Jersey Medicaid Guide for Requesting Communication Access](#)
- [Helen Keller National Center-SSP Fact Sheet](#)
- [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf](#)
- [Tips for Working with a Sign Language Interpreter When Communicating with a DeafBlind Individual](#)
- [New Jersey Courts-ADA Title II Get Help](#)
- [SSP White Paper: Deafblind People and Support Service Providers in the 21st Century](#)



Additional resources may also be available.



State of New Jersey

Mikie Sherrill, Governor | Dr. Dale G. Caldwell, Lt. Governor



Department of Human Services
Dr. Stephen Cha, Commissioner

