

Preparing Performing Arts Venues for Deaf Audience Members and ASL Interpreters

Creating an inclusive environment for Deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons is essential to equitable access in the performing arts. This guide provides best practices, logistics, communication strategies, and resources to support venues in preparing for Deaf audience members and working effectively with American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters.

1. Planning & Pre-Show Preparation

1.1 Identify Access Needs Early

- Add an accessibility question during ticket purchase (e.g., “Do you need ASL interpretation or other accommodations?”).
- Maintain a simple process for requesting ASL interpreters, including deadlines for requests (commonly 2–3 weeks prior).
- Provide clear information about accessible services on the venue’s website.

1.2 Arrange for Qualified Interpreters

- Contract certified ASL interpreters with experience in performing arts.
- Ensure interpreters have access to:
 - Scripts, lyrics, and program notes
 - Audio recordings (if applicable)
 - Rehearsal videos or run-throughs
- If multiple interpreters or teams are engaged, designate an interpreter coordinator, or request one through RISE.

1.3 Coordinate with Production Staff

- Schedule interpreter rehearsals or practice sessions with stage managers.
- Confirm cue sheets so interpreters can sync with lighting, music, and staging.
- Discuss sightline considerations, interpreter lighting, and stage placement.

2. Venue Logistics

2.1 Interpreter Positioning

- Interpreters should be:
 - Well-lit (but not blinded by spotlight)
 - Visible from reserved Deaf seating sections
 - Stationed where they can see actors, screens, and cues
- Use **consistent, even front lighting**; avoid color washes that reduce visibility.

2.2 Seating Arrangements

- Reserve seating areas providing:
 - Direct line of sight to both interpreters and the stage
 - Minimal obstructions (balconies, railings, columns)
- Mark accessible seating on the box office system and notify ushers in advance.

2.3 Assistive Listening Options

Even if ASL interpretation is offered, some Deaf/hard-of-hearing patrons may prefer:

- Assistive listening devices (ALDs)
- FM or induction loop systems
- Captioning (open or closed)

Have staff trained to distribute and troubleshoot equipment.

3. Front-of-House Communication

3.1 Staff Training Essentials

All ushers, box office staff, and volunteers should know:

- Basic communication tips:
 - Face the person directly
 - Speak clearly at a normal pace
 - Avoid covering your mouth
 - Use gestures or writing if needed
- How to guide patrons to ASL-interpreted seating
- Proper etiquette around interpreters:
 - Interpreters are not “performers”—they work to provide access
 - Interpreters should not be redirected, moved, or put on the spot

3.2 Signage and Programs

- Clearly display signs indicating the ASL-interpreted performance.
- If possible, **provide visual announcements** in the lobby or pre-show screens.

4. Working with ASL Interpreters

4.1 Best Practices

- Provide all materials early, in accessible digital formats.
- Offer a private greenroom or preparation space.
- Check in with interpreters pre-show for any last-minute adjustments.

4.2 Seating Arrangements

For longer or more complex productions:

- Use **team interpreting**, where two interpreters switch roles every 20–30 minutes.
- Have clear plans for transitions to ensure smooth delivery.

4.3 Technical Considerations

- Avoid placing interpreters in shadows or flashing lights.
- Coordinate with sound and lighting crews to maintain consistent visibility.
- If filming or live-streaming:
 - Ensure interpreters remain in frame
 - Use picture-in-picture options when appropriate

5. Accessibility During the Performance

5.1 Visual Alerts

- Provide visual alternatives for announcements normally delivered over audio (e.g., house open, late seating, emergency instructions).
- Present emergency information via:
 - Digital screens
 - Flashing lights
 - Instructions from staff trained to gesture clearly

5.2 Flexible Seating for Interpreters

- Ensure interpreters can see:
 - The full width of the stage
 - Cue lights
 - Projection screens or surtitles
 - Critical entrances/exits

6. Post-Show Considerations

6.1 Feedback Collection

Invite Deaf patrons to share their experience:

- Quick survey with visual formatting
- QR codes linking to accessible forms
- Ask about visibility, interpreter quality, and overall experience

6.2 Debrief with Interpreters

Discuss:

- What worked well
- What challenges occurred
- Improvements for future shows

6.3 Accessibility Reporting

Document each ASL-interpreted event:

- Offer
 - Seating configuration
 - Interpreter team used
 - Patron feedback
 - Technical notes
- Use this record to improve processes and build institutional knowledge

7. Additional Best Practices

7.1 Marketing Accessible Performances

- Promote ASL-interpreted shows with:
 - ASL video announcements
 - Social media posts using #ASLInterpreted or #DeafAccessible
 - Clearly labeled events on the venue website

7.2 Community Engagement

- Partner with local Deaf organizations and schools.
- Host “Deaf Nights” or talkbacks with interpreters.
- Offer ASL tours for backstage or lobby exhibitions.

8. Resources for Venues

Accessibility Standards

- ADA Title III Accessibility Guidelines
- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) for online content

Deaf Culture and ASL Learning

- National Association of the Deaf (NAD)
- Local Deaf community centers
- Gallaudet University online ASL resources

9. Changes and Cancellations

- If Deaf patrons cancel their attendance, the venue should also cancel the ASL interpreters immediately.
- If interpreters are not canceled with sufficient notice, they will bill for the full show.
- Communicate all changes promptly to the RISE Interpreting team.
- Provide as much notice as possible to avoid unnecessary charges.

Summary Checklist

Before the Show

- Confirm interpreter booking
- Provide script/music/notes
- Assign interpreter placement
- Reserve Deaf-friendly seating
- Train FOH staff

During the Show

- Ensure interpreters are visible and well lit
- Keep seats unobstructed
- Maintain visual alerts

After the Show

- Collect feedback
- Debrief with interpreters
- Document improvements