

Video Remote Interpreting (VRI)

Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), recipients of federal funding must take appropriate steps to ensure effective communications with all applicants, participants, and members of the public in their programs and activities.¹ This includes providing “auxiliary aids and services” where it is necessary to afford an equal opportunity for a person with a disability to enjoy the benefits of a recipient’s program or activity. Auxiliary aids and services include, but are not limited to, sign language interpreters and captioning services.

What is VRI?

To communicate with people who are deaf or hard of hearing, recipients may choose to use an on-site qualified interpreter² or VRI services. VRI is a service that uses video-conferencing technology to access an off-site interpreter that provides a real-time sign language interpreter to communicate with a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. The ADA allows recipients to select between the use of VRI services or on-site interpreters where either service would provide effective communication with a person who is deaf or hard of hearing. However, the use of in-person interpreting is an industry best practice.

General Requirements

A recipient that chooses to provide VRI services must ensure that all of the following standards are met:

1. Real-time, full-motion video and audio over a high-speed, wide-bandwidth video connection or wireless connection that delivers high-quality video images that do not produce lags, choppy, blurry, or grainy images, or irregular pauses in communication;
2. A sharply delineated image that is large enough to display the interpreter’s face, arms, hands, and fingers, as well as the face, arms, hands, and fingers of the person using sign language, regardless of his/her body position;
3. A clear, audible transmission of voices; and
4. Adequate staff training to ensure quick set-up and proper operation.

When are VRI services useful?

Under some circumstances, and if used appropriately, VRI services are beneficial:

- In situations when a recipient needs immediate, effective access to interpreting services, such as in an emergency or unplanned incident;
- In areas where on-site interpreters may be difficult to obtain, such as a rural area; and
- While awaiting the arrival of an in-person interpreter.

When should VRI services not be used?

While there are instances in which utilizing VRI would provide effective communication, there are situations where it may be inappropriate to use VRI services. For example:

- If the recipient does not have the technology in place to support providing effective VRI services, in accordance with legal requirements.
- If the person with a disability cannot see the screen, either because of vision loss or because he/she cannot be properly positioned to see the screen due to injury or another condition; etc.

¹ Recipients are not required to take any action that would result in a fundamental alteration in the nature of a service, program, or activity or in undue financial and administrative burdens.

² A qualified interpreter for an individual with a disability means an interpreter who, via a video remote interpreting (VRI) service or an on-site appearance, is able to interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially, both receptively and expressively, using any necessary specialized vocabulary.