SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING SYSTEMS: AN INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION EQUITY- BRITISH COLUMBIA (ACE-BC)

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Contents

Introduction

Countries around the world have a variety of systems and models for the provision of sign language interpretation services. Even within countries: states, provinces, territories, districts etc., there is a great deal of variety. These systems are complex and we are beginning to see a movement towards recognizing the value of analyzing sign language interpreting provision from a systems level perspective. Haualand et al. (2022) suggest the need to take this further and to analyze and understand that not only are the systems of sign language provision themselves complicated, but that these systems do not exist independently from other complex systems. The provision of sign language interpretation services interacts with other deeply complex systems such as the legal system, medical system and education system (Haualand et al., 2022).

In 2023, the Community and Systems Engagement (CASE) committee, a sub committee of the Westcoast Association of Visual Language Interpreters (WAVLI), undertook a research project to engage stakeholders and Deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind (DHHDB) community members (McLaughlin & Russell, 2023). This project stemmed from many conversations among stakeholders and community members regarding the ways in which the current system for sign language provision is not meeting the needs of DHHDB people in British Columbia, Canada.

The overarching goal of projects that engage community members and stakeholders is not only recognizing that systems are not meeting the needs of DHHDB people but also understanding why that is and actively working to discover approaches to improve the system. This is the motivating force behind this two part project funded by Academic Communication Equity-British Columbia (ACE-BC). Both of these projects approach the issue from a systems change theory perspective, understanding that it is important to not only highlight the issues that exist but to understand the root causes of the issues, if we want to make sustainable and impactful changes (Badgett, 2022). This report was designed in conjunction with an ACE-BC project aiming to create three maps of the current sign language interpreting provision system in BC[1]. These two projects complement and support each other as it is important to understand both the realities of our current system, while imagining what a more ideal system could look like, thus, we can start narrowing the gap between the two (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007).

Along these lines, this report was designed to explore different systems around the world, focusing on their key features, benefits and challenges, with the hopes of imagining how these features could be applied to our context in BC. This broad overview is meant as a starting point for inspiring discussion, brainstorming, collaboration and was developed in conjunction with a design project mapping the interpreting system in BC. The information in this report is based on an environmental scan, which gathered data from peer-reviewed published literature and grey literature (organizational websites, blogs, news articles etc.).

The information in this report is intended to initiate fruitful discussions and is not an exhaustive list of all possibilities, options or features of systems. In her article describing her experience navigating interpreting systems as a Deaf consumer, Burke (2017) explains how language access is key to the concept of human flourishing in Deaf lives. The goal of this report is to offer an overview of three different types of interpreting systems around the globe, some of the features of each system and some of the benefits and challenges connected to each system

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[1] The ACE-BC systems mapping project is "Visualizing the Interpreting System in BC: Challenges, Insights, and Recommendations for Next Steps" by Bryan Hemingway, MA

with the hopes of envisioning an environment where the DHHDB community can flourish.

Centralized Systems

A centralized system for provision of sign language services is characterized mainly by the funding and hiring structure. Typically in a centralized system, there are a few main funding sources that support a few main agencies, organizations or associations. The majority of funding usually comes from a government body and is then distributed to a small number of agencies, organizations or associations that are then responsible for hiring interpreters.
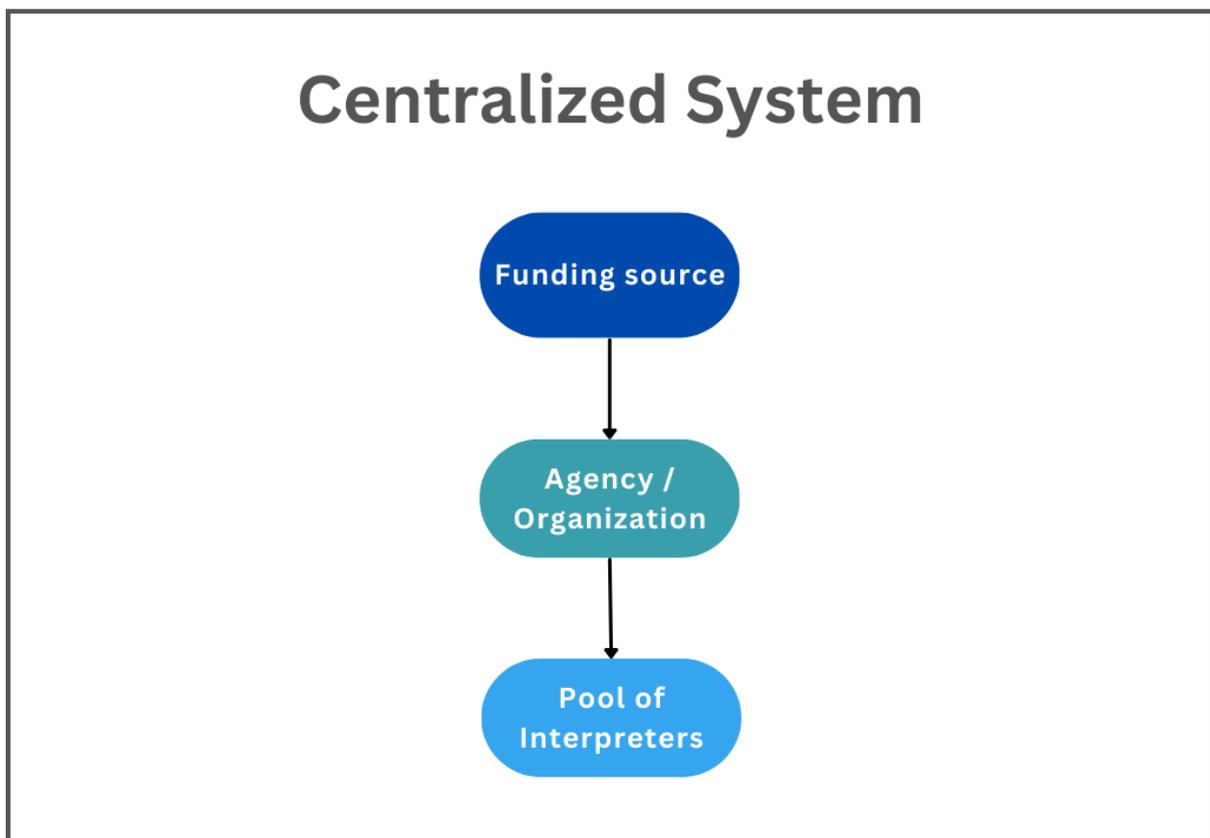
Simplified diagram of a centralized interpreting system

In Lithuania, for example, all funding is delivered through a single government department and services are then provided through a single institution (de Wit, 2020). The Department of Disability Affairs, a government department of the Republic of Lithuania, funds the Lithuanian Sign Language Translation Centre, which then provides sign language services to 10 different counties within Lithuania (*Information Provided by the Republic of Lithuania to the Report of the United*

Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Pursuant to UN Human Rights Council Resolution 49/12, 2022). A centralized system, such as the one seen in Lithuania, has some key benefits. Generally, these systems are easier to navigate than decentralized systems. In a blog comparing the decentralized system in England to the centralized system in Lithuania, Lina Cankas (2016) explains what it is like to navigate both systems and the comparative ease for DHHDB people and service providers to navigate a centralized system.

In other instances, centralized systems have been found to reduce certain discriminatory practices. In the United States, for example, after eight years of litigation, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) was ordered to re-centralize interpreting services for Deaf employees in Washington, D.C.(*USDA Returns to Centralized Interpreting Services in Landmark Settlement, Improving Interpreter Access and Addressing Discriminatory Employment Disincentives*, 2022). In a decentralized system, each subagency is responsible for their own budget and funding for accommodation services, such as sign language interpreting services. This means subagencies are often disincentivized to hire DHHDB people. By re-centralizing the USDA system and requiring all subagencies to contribute proportionally, regardless of how many DHHDB employees they have, this ruling is able to address this issue and reduce discriminatory hiring practices towards DHHDB people.

A centralized system also has drawbacks. Processes can sometimes be slower when they are required to pass through multiple layers of approval. For example, it may take longer to have sign language services approved, or to get access to prep material or authorization to have a co-interpreter etc. (Witter-Merithew et al., 2014). In a centralized system, DHHDB individuals often have less power to request specific interpreters (Cankas, 2016). There can also be less autonomy in a centralized system, particularly for those not in positions of power e.g. managerial, board, governance positions, compared to a decentralized system (Finn, 2000).

A centralized system, however, does have the benefit of pooling more resources, gathering and sharing more information more easily and establishing and upholding best practices (Boockmann et al., 2015).

Decentralized Systems

In most decentralized systems, funding for interpreting services is acquired through multiple sources and interpreters are hired through a variety of agencies and organizations. Many countries around the world, including Canada, use a decentralized system for providing interpreting services.
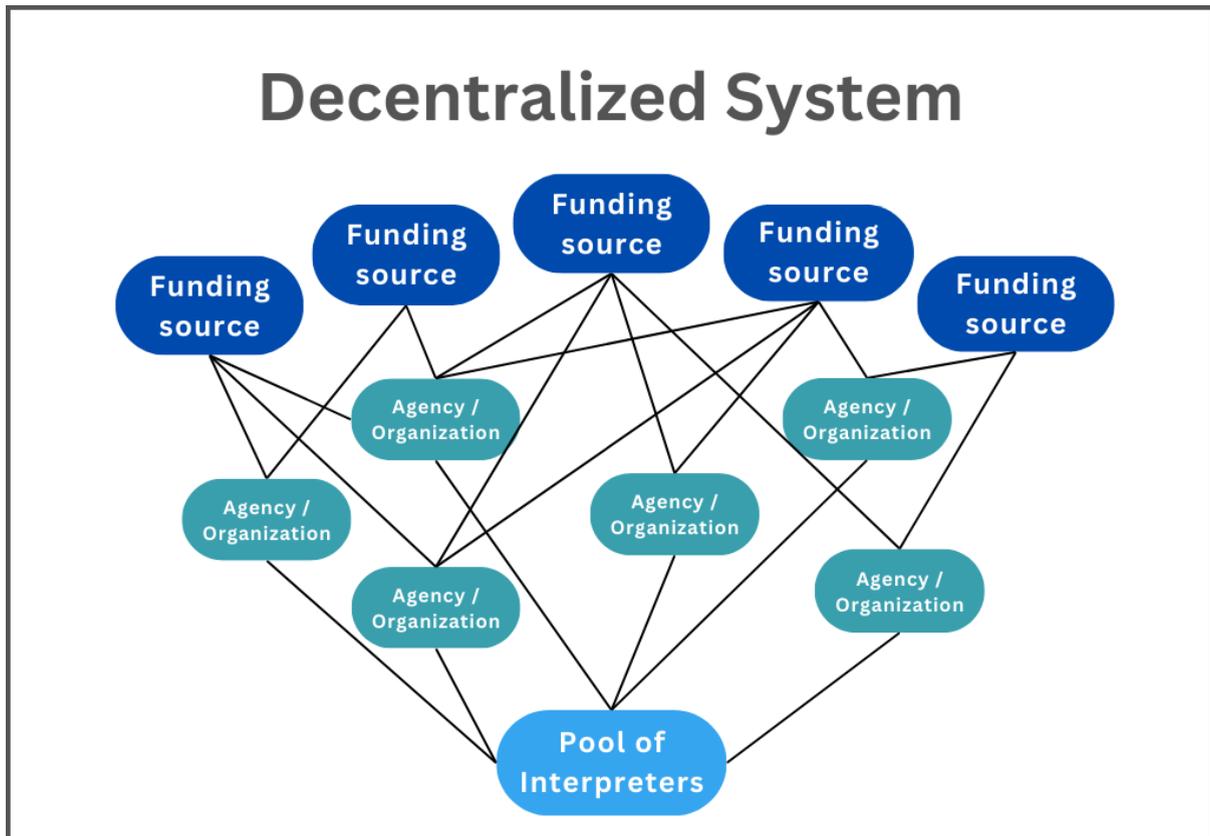
Simplified diagram of a decentralized interpreting system

Some benefits of a decentralized system include, the ability for agencies to provide specialized services and have more autonomy in decision-making and service delivery (Boockmann et al., 2015). Decentralized systems are typically also better equipped to understand and address the local needs of specific groups (Boockmann et al., 2015). Countries around the world have moved to decentralized models for provision of a variety of public sector services (e.g. sign language interpreting services) including: Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, Germany, Austria and Belgium. Many countries are choosing this option because of the bottom-up nature of decentralized systems, compared to the top-down approach in centralized systems, which allows for the involvement of more community organizations and local level solutions (Finn, 2000).

As mentioned above, centralized systems have less autonomy than decentralized systems, however, decentralized systems can often have less accountability. In their presentation explaining how centralized systems in the United States support the success of DHHDB students attending colleges and universities, Alkebsi and Zito (2021) note that services are often not provided or accommodations not arranged in decentralized systems because each department is responsible for budgeting and

coordinating. With no one responsible for overseeing services, it is all too easy for the needs of the DHHDB community to go unmet.

Decentralized systems can have geographical disparities because there is no one governing set of policies as is the case in Spain where the country is divided into 17 autonomous regional governments, with no standardization of services for DHHDB people in Spain, the quality of services received depends greatly on the region you are in (Casado, 2019).

Cooperative Systems

In 2020, a British organization recognized that the needs of the local DHHDB community to access health services were not being met. This organization conducted a research project and out of those findings, established Signalise – a multi-stakeholder cooperative that focuses on health services (Clifford, 2020).
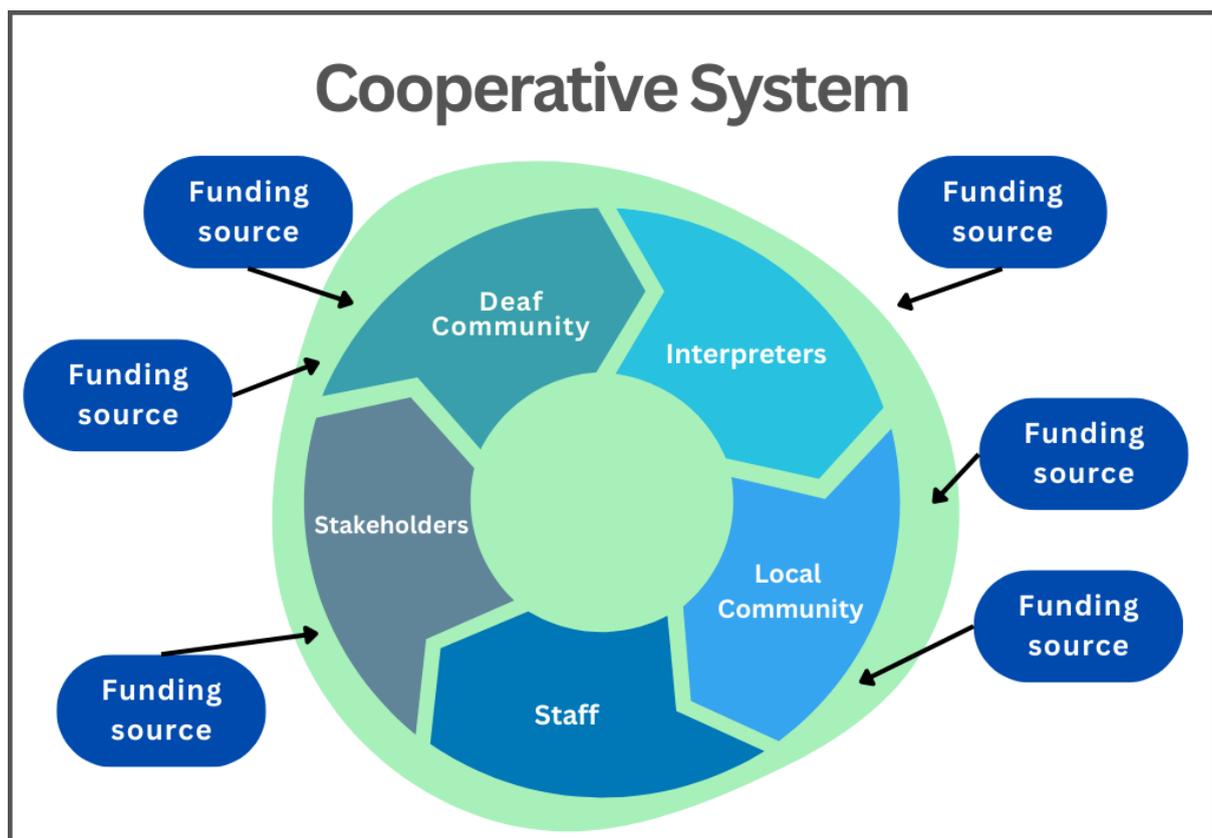
Simplified diagram of a cooperative interpreting system

A cooperative model revolves around key values and principles. The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) defines a cooperative as an "autonomous association of

persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise" (*The International Cooperative Alliance*, n.d.). The cooperative model is unique in that they are democratically run, with stakeholders having equal decision-making power. Cooperatives are run on six key values and seven guiding principles.

Guiding Principles

- Voluntary and Open Membership
- Democratic Member Control
- Member Economic Participation
- Autonomy and Independence
- Education, Training, and Information
- Cooperation among Cooperatives
- Concern for Community

Cooperative Systems

Key Values

- Self-help
- Self-responsibility
- Democracy
- Equality
- Equity
- Solidarity
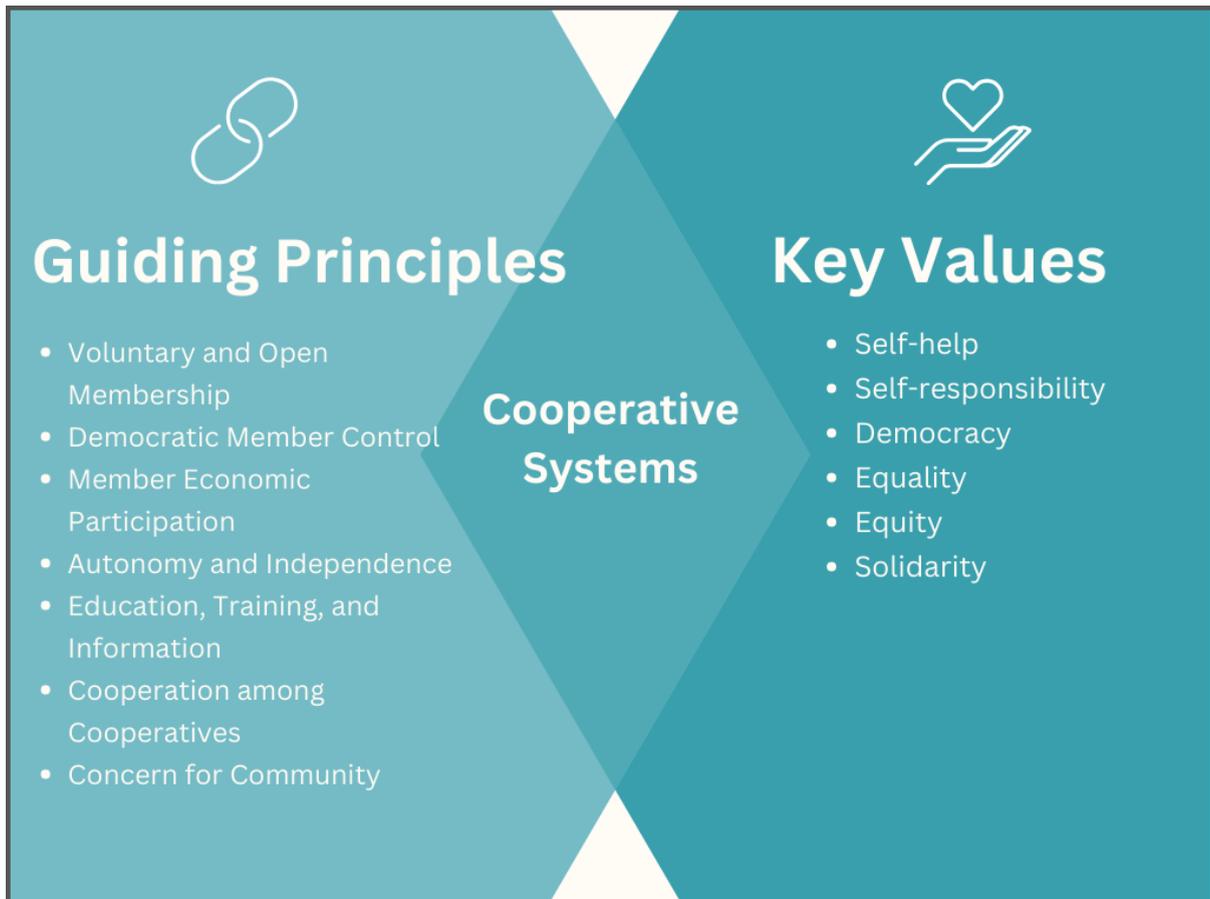
The Signalise research project mentioned above, encouraged participation from a variety of stakeholders. Key themes emerged, highlighting what stakeholders recognized as main issues with the current system and what characteristics they would like to see in an ideal system. These main themes included:

Issues with the current system VS Goals for an ideal system

Issues with the current system:
- Lack of choice
- Lack of local knowledge
- Lack of availability and poor quality
- Lack of understanding about Deaf people's communication needs
- Failure to meet interpreting industry terms and conditions
- Difficulties obtaining payment for work done

Goals for an ideal system:
- Choice and control for Deaf people and interpreters
- Education and professional development
- Understanding the Deaf community and their needs
- Respect for interpreters' terms and conditions
- User-led
- Easy to use
- Fair and transparent

Cooperatives like Signalise aim to address issues around lack of choice, lack of understanding of DHHDB people's needs and lack of local knowledge by creating an environment where DHHDB community members have an equal vote and a say in how the cooperative is run. The staff and board at Signalize are comprised of multiple stakeholders, including DHHDB community members and interpreters, which helps to ensure that the valuable perspectives of both of these groups guide the design and delivery of interpreting services.They also hope to benefit the community by reinvesting profits back into the community through, for example, funding mentoring and training of interpreters.

Additional Features Worth Highlighting

There are some features I came across that are not unique to one specific system but are worth highlighting in this report, as these features impact the flow of services, regardless of what type of system they are operating within. Particularly, how funds are procured and how they are distributed has a noticeable impact on the provision of interpreting services.

Block versus Individualized Funding

All of the above mentioned systems can be funded in a variety of ways. One key difference is between block funding and individualized funding. In a system that relies on block funding, a lump sum is made available, usually through national level government, for agencies/associations/organizations to provide services. A system that relies on individualized funding allocates an amount of funding to an individual rather than an organization. The individualized funding model is a consumer-controlled funding model, which provides autonomy in decision-making for the individual about the services they wish to access to meet their self-identified needs and individual goals (Foley et al., 2021). Countries tend to use either solely block funding or a mixture of block and individualized funding.

Countries that employ individualized funding for interpreting services do so by allotted hours or a percentage of time. For example, in the Netherlands, interpreting services for DHHDB people are covered by the government 100% in education settings and 15% in work settings, with an additional 30 hours per year allotted for use in private settings (de Wit, 2020). Many countries in Europe cover interpreting services completely in education settings; other countries, for example Lithuania, have no limits on the amount of coverage for interpreting services for individuals but requests for interpreters can still go unmet as there are not enough interpreters to meet the demand (de Wit, 2020). In their extensive systematic review of individualized funding, Fleming et al. (2019) found that recipients of individualized funding highly valued this model for many reasons, including more value for their money and the freedom to choose when accessing services.

Framework Agreements for Procuring Funds

In the context of this report, framework agreements are defined as an agreement with one or more economic operators for the supply of services, the purpose of which is to establish the terms governing contracts to be awarded by one or more contracting authorities during a given period, in particular with regard to maximum price (OECD, n.d.). Framework agreements have grown in popularity as they are seen as more efficient, saving resources, costs and time, compared with other forms of negotiating terms and conditions (Andhov, 2015). However, it is important to note that the ways in which agencies, organizations and associations bid on large contracts for interpreting services can have an impact on sign language service delivery. The nature of framework agreements influence contract bidding that can create a "race to the bottom" scenario where funds are awarded to whoever makes a lowest-cost proposal, rather than a best-value proposal. In a best-value proposal,

other elements besides budget can be considered and points awarded for elements such as, quality of service, capacity, expertise, local preferences etc. (Avantpage, 2022).

Particularly in the language interpretation sector, we see this as larger spoken language agencies and companies winning bids for contracts but not understanding the unique and specific needs of signed language interpreting services compared to spoken language services (Riddle, 2019). In the United Kingdom, for example, the introduction for national frameworks agreements for procuring contracts for interpreting services for the public sector has lead to the consequence that "only multilingual interpreting agencies are eligible to bid for contracts; excluding smaller, local, specialist/deaf-led agencies" (Riddle, 2019, p.14).

Recommendations

This report has touched on some features of different service provisions models. Highlighting some of the advantages and disadvantages of different systems. As mentioned above, what is presented here is not an exhaustive scan and, congruently, the recommendations below are not an exhaustive list but are presented with the goal of sparking dialogue and imaging potentials for the future.

Retention of Interpreters

In her book Thinking in Systems, Meadows (2008) highlights one common pitfall of systems well with her analogy of a bathtub. As Meadows explains, the stock in a system is something you can measure e.g. water in a bathtub. The stock is affected by inflows and outflows – water flowing into the tub through a faucet or out of a tub through the drain. Our natural tendency as humans, as Meadows highlights, is to focus more on inflows than outflows. Applying this to the systems in our field, we can see how people tend to focus on recruiting more interpreters (inflow) as the best approach to increasing accessibility, while overlooking other possible complimentary (outflow) solutions.

For example, while focusing on hiring and recruiting new interpreters to the field, we can also focus on creating more job stability to retain the current interpreters we have. Recommendations for this might include looking into systems of permanent staff positions versus subcontracting interpreters. Armenia, for example, has permanent staff positions for all sign language interpreters, although the pool of interpreters is quite small (de Wit, 2020). In Estonia, sign language interpreters are

provided with medical insurance, social security and pension benefits and France provides both social security and pension benefits (de Wit, 2020). The retention of interpreters in the system not only increases the overall number of available interpreters, it also increases the number of experienced interpreters available to move into specialized sectors and mentorships roles.

Increasing Language-Concordant Services

Important recommendations began to emerge through the research component of this report. Many researchers and stakeholders hold the perspective that systems providing sign language interpreting services are not sufficiently meeting the needs of DHHDB consumers. In their article "Sign language interpreting services: A quick fix for inclusion?" De Meulder and Haualand (2021) point out one severe oversight which is, ignoring the need for more language-concordant services and instead focusing solely on increasing access via sign language interpreting services. An example of this would be Dexter Health Center's Deaf Health Clinic in Michigan, which offers a range of primary care services including mental health services in American Sign Language (Panzer et al., 2020).

There is a large body of research showing that DHHDB people have better health outcomes (McKee et al., 2011; Nicodemus et al., 2014) and education outcomes (Svartholm, 2014; Scott & Hoffmeister, 2017; Murray et al., 2020) when accessing information and services directly in a signed language, compared to accessing through interpreted interactions. This improvement in outcomes is benefit enough in and of itself, additionally, when we look at the system as a whole we see other benefits as well. Language-concordant services not only result in better outcomes for DHHBD people, they also reduce the need for interpreters, thus freeing up interpreting service provision hours and reducing the demand on a resource limited system. Much like Meadows' (2008) bathtub metaphor above and the importance of retaining interpreters, providing language-concordant services and therefore creating less of a demand for interpreting services can also be of benefit to the system. Knowing this, it would be worthwhile to not only advocate for more interpreting services but to also advocate for more language-concordant services.

Focus on Features that Increase Autonomy

One key component of autonomy is choice, which may make it worthwhile to explore features of a system that provide more choice for DHHDB community members. This could induce features such as: individualized funding options and ability to request specific interpreters (Taylor et al., 2018). For example, Centralized Interpreter

Referral Service (CIRS) is a nonprofit in the US that provides information for consumers based on interpreter skill level, gender preference, language use preference and other special considerations (Centralized Interpreter Referral Service (CIRS), n.d.). Burke (2017) explains how the ability to choose an interpreter increases autonomy and suggests "interpreters and interpreting agencies can take the lead on establishing and normalizing such practices, but should approach this as a joint effort that includes members of the Deaf community" (p.293).

Autonomy could also come in the form of supporting the Deaf Ecosystem through economic empowerment and visibility (Grushkin, n.d.). This could mean a focus on interpreting service provision systems that are DHHDB owned, operated or staffed or on systems that increase structural power for the DHHDB community, such as cooperative interpreting systems.

Partnerships in Decentralized Systems

As mentioned above, decentralized systems often allow for more autonomy and are better able to understand and match the needs of the local DHHDB community. However, a decentralized system can often lead to siloed services. This is why, if working within a decentralized system it would be recommended to build strong partnerships as a way to pool resources, streamline communication, transfer information and avoid duplication of efforts (Finn, 2000). If we choose to continue to build on a decentralized model in BC, we will have the benefit of being able to address local needs but also run the risk of duplicating efforts and becoming continually more siloed. We can have an ideal combination of initiatives that meet the needs of the local DHHDB community, while avoiding potential pitfalls of a decentralized system, by building strong partnerships.

Addressing Disparities in Decentralized Systems

Applicable to the setting in BC, where service quality varies between urban and rural settings, it may be worth looking at initiatives that aim to reduce these disparities. For example, the Colorado Department of Human Services launched a program in 2022 called the Colorado Rural Interpreter Skills Enhancement (RISE). The RISE program recruits and trains people who live in rural communities, or who are interested in relocating and working in rural settings, to become American Sign Language Interpreters (*CDHS Increases Access to Quality Sign Language Interpreting Services in Rural Communities*, 2022). The Yukon similarly has a program designed to address this issue whereby a sign language interpreter is employed full-time by the Yukon government and all costs for interpreting services for DHHDB people are

covered, which has shown to improve access for the DHHDB community in the Yukon (Breen, 2015). These types of initiatives have a substantial impact on a community and may be worth exploring further.

Budget and Coordination of Interpreting Services

In their presentation on creating successful environments for DHHDB students in postsecondary settings, Alkebsi and Zito (2021) highlight that issues often arise when there is discordance between budget and coordination of interpreting services in systems. In their presentation, they provide real life examples of Deaf college students' experience with this issue. In one instance, a Deaf student wanted to join the ASL Club at their school but was unable to as most of the members of the club were not fluent signers and there was no budget for ASL interpreters for clubs. When Alkebsi and Zito (2021) looked into the issue they discovered that the college did have a centralized system for coordinating interpreters, so it would have been possible to provide an interpreter but because the budget for interpreters was decentralized, and each department was responsible for paying for interpreting services, the Deaf student was not provided access. This is similar to the discriminatory practices mentioned above with the USDA and the move to re-centralizing budgeting and coordination of interpreting services to combat this discrimination.

This is why it is highly recommended to take a holistic approach to the interpreting system and avoid this issue by making sure both the budget and coordination of interpreting services are taken into consideration. This discordance can happen in all types of systems if either element, budgeting or coordination of services, is overlooked but can be particularly challenging if the goal is to create a more centralized system, reduce discriminatory practices or improve access for the DHHDB community.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of this report is the inability to access resources in all languages. This environmental scan was limited to information that was searchable in either American Sign Language or English. As a hearing sign language interpreter, typically navigating the system as a contractor/employee, I am also limited in my knowledge of the intricate workings of systems locally and globally compared to the knowledge and lived experience that DHHDB people have as a result of having to navigate the system as a consumer and as a member of a linguistic minority.

Conclusion

As you can see above, there is no perfect system. There are advantages and disadvantages of different systems and of features and elements within systems. As a community, we can come together to decide how we want to change, modify, and improve our current system here in BC. Hopefully this report, as well as the complimentary ACE-BC systems mapping project, will play a role in envisioning positive changes for the future interpreting services in BC.

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