

Madison Wurtele [00:05 - 00:09]

My name is Madison, and I'm an attorney with Disability Rights Nebraska.

Madison Wurtele [00:09 - 00:15]

Ms. Davis, I want to first thank you for talking with me today about accessibility and communication barriers.

Madison Wurtele [00:16 - 00:21]

Before we get started, would you introduce yourself, and tell us a little bit about the work you do?

Kim Davis [00:24 - 00:31]

Yes, sure. It's an honor to be invited. Madison, thank you so much for this opportunity.

Kim Davis [00:31 - 00:57]

My name is Kim Davis, and I am an advocacy specialist for the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Our agency serves the broader population of Nebraskans who are deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing. We do a lot of advocacy around different areas and like, for example, this vlog that we're going to be doing.

Kim Davis [01:00 - 01:14]

I want to introduce our sign language interpreter as well. Her name is Sharon Sinclair, and she also works at the Nebraska Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing as a program interpreter program coordinator.

Kim Davis [01:15 - 01:27]

And so, we have, let's see, 3, 3 employees who are deaf that rely on Sharon's services. And so, it's nice to have a staff interpreter. That's a great benefit to us.

Madison Wurtele [01:29 - 01:41]

Well, great. Welcome to you both. So, my first question is, National American Sign Language Day is April 15th. How does sign language compare to other spoken languages?

Kim Davis [01:52 - 02:09]

Spoken language is, of course, auditory, verbal, whereas sign language is a visual language, visual communication. But it's the same concept. We receive audio through our eyes whereas, and, and the spoken is done through hands. So, it's kind of the same concept.

Madison Wurtele [02:11 - 02:13]

Are there different types of sign languages?

Kim Davis [02:18 - 02:37]

There is. Here in Nebraska or, I'm sorry, the United States, we use American Sign Language, and it's been around for over 200 years. It has its own syntax, grammar, you know, concepts, things like that.

Kim Davis [02:37 - 02:44]

It has its own structure. It's not the same as English. It's not English order.

Kim Davis [02:44 - 03:08]

However, there's concepts that are integrated into the language to provide English information in a different way. And then there's other modes of sign language, typically here in Nebraska, that are used. And that is what is called Pidgin Signed English. And then Signing Exact English.

Kim Davis [03:08 - 03:27]

Those two typically are used in schools, school systems, K through 12, typically is where you'll see that. And they think it's for the purpose of helping to learn English grammar. That's been around since about the 1970s.

Kim Davis [03:28 - 03:46]

When they started allowing kids who are deaf to enter their neighboring public schools, what they call a mainstream education, and they, they said it was, the purpose was to help with English grammar. Whether it's successful or not, the jury's still out.

Kim Davis [03:48 - 04:14]

So, let's see, how can I explain it best? I'm trying to think of how I want to

explain it, but most of the, the students who use those, it depends on what they have in their Individual Education Program, their IEP, the if the parents want that, then the interpreter has to have the, the competency to sign in their preferred mode.

Kim Davis [04:15 - 04:42]

Whether that's ASL, PSE, or SEE. ASL is very expressive, has a lot of facial grammar, less mouth movements, where, you know, you're actually mouthing the words word-for-word. It doesn't do that. PSE and SEE, use a lot less facial expression and more of the mouth movements.

Kim Davis [04:42 - 04:56]

So it's more, like I said, in an English order. SEE is very English. They add the endings of, of words like the -ing's, the -ed's, to emphasize that.

Kim Davis [04:57 - 05:14]

But again, less facial expression. Again, the jury's out whether or not it's a success in what it was intended to do. But again, it's individualized. If somebody, if that works for somebody, great. If not, then they have to, you know, do modifications to find out what's effective for them.

Madison Wurtele [05:15 - 05:22]

Great, thank you. And is there certain etiquette someone should follow when speaking to someone who is using an interpreter?

Kim Davis [05:29 - 05:44]

Yes. There is. One of the most important things is when you have a sign language interpreter with you, don't look at the interpreter. Don't say "tell her," "tell him." Just talk directly to the person that you're talking to. It's a, it's a communication between us.

Kim Davis [05:46 - 06:06]

The interpreter is just there to facilitate and bridge that communication barrier. They're there to break down that barrier and, and make sure that the, our conversation is effective. I'm a person. I'm just like you. And, like I said, the interpreter is just there to facilitate the communication.

Madison Wurtele [06:07 - 06:15]

Ok, and what are some other type of communication methods that people from the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community use?

Kim Davis [06:24 - 06:28]

Methods? What kind? Like, what are you looking for exactly?

Madison Wurtele [06:29 - 06:39]

Do some individuals prefer to use other modes? Do they prefer to use writing, or lip reading, or closed captioning? Things like that?

Kim Davis [06:43 - 07:11]

Yes, yes. Like I said, every individual, everyone is diverse in their preference of communication. You could meet a person who is deaf that can't hear anything at all, but has the ability to speak or lip read very well. For one-on-one situations, those are great, but with a group situation, that might be a challenge to lip read.

Kim Davis [07:11 - 07:37]

So you may want to consider a different mode that will be effective for them, whether that's a captioning service, whether they want to use a sign language interpreter, and that's if the person knows sign language. They may be what we call an oral deaf, O-R-A-L, which is typically someone who relies on whatever hearing they have and speech reading. But someone who signs will probably prefer to have a sign language interpreter.

Kim Davis [07:38 - 07:54]

Captioning, you know, depends on the person's literacy skills. And sometimes, the speed of the captions can be a challenge. You know, how fast can you read?

Kim Davis [07:56 - 08:32]

And how much, how many, how many of the... sometimes, if you look at the news on TV, sometimes you will see captioning that is only 2 or 3 words on a line, and it scrolls very fast. And that's difficult to read. So if it's a longer sentence with a slower scrolling speed, like maybe seven words on a line, to

make it more easier to read, uh, for a hard of hearing person, they may rely on whatever residual hearing they have.

Kim Davis [08:33 - 09:06]

Sometimes they'll use an assistive technology device. If it's a larger system for a larger room, or whether it's a personal listening device for one-on-ones or small groups, a lot of hard of hearing people who are losing their hearing, when they're watching the news, a lot of them have a challenge with reading the captions, because they've been used to getting all of their information auditory. And so, they have to think of a new way of getting information. So that's where you think of the speed of captioning.

Kim Davis [09:07 - 09:33]

But again, whether you're hearing, have the ability to hear, or if you're deaf, you know, even reading a book, sometimes it's an individual thing. Some, not everyone is the same. Captioning doesn't show, you know, emotion. As, you know, there's no tone. Where a sign language interpreter does.

Kim Davis [09:33 - 10:04]

If you watch any of the Governor's news, Governor's news conferences in our state or even the City Mayor where they've brought in sign language interpreters you can see where they use facial expression to convey emphasis and importance of the message or what's happening with COVID and our pandemic, what's going on and so that information, in first language, is very important for people who live in the state of Nebraska.

Madison Wurtele [10:06 - 10:25]

Thank you. And I want to get more into talking about the press briefings and communication in government programming. And, but before we get to that, could you talk about some of the misconceptions around communicating with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing?

Kim Davis [10:40 - 10:58]

I think, again, it depends on what kind of exposure the person themselves has had, and any experiences. For example, someone who meets a deaf person,

maybe they had a bad experience, and then they think everyone is just like that person. Well that's not true.

Kim Davis [10:59 - 11:14]

An employer, you know, wants to hire someone and thinks, "Oh, this hasn't worked out with this deaf person." So then from that point forward, they won't hire another person who's deaf. Because they think, "Oh, I had this, this communication challenge."

Kim Davis [11:14 - 11:26]

Well, the challenge could have become, come from the employer and their attitude versus the deaf person. So those are some misconceptions and things to consider.

Kim Davis [11:27 - 11:46]

If you're, some people think if you use sign language, you can't speak, or if you've become deaf, you are born deaf. "Oh, you better not teach them sign language, because they will never learn how to speak." Well, that's not true. So there's a lot of misconceptions out there, really.

Kim Davis [11:48 - 12:09]

Another one is, every once in a while, I'll meet with a group of people. And typically in a rural area or someone who is elderly, they will still use, "Oh, yeah. I know someone who is deaf and dumb," and I just you know, think, "Oh." Or they use "deaf mute."

Kim Davis [12:09 - 12:25]

Well, if you look up mute in the dictionary, it says, the person doesn't have the capability to use their voice. People who are deaf can. They may not be fluent in their speech. Some of them are, but they have the ability to scream.

Kim Davis [12:25 - 12:38]

They have a voice. They make noise. And, I mean, I readily admit they may not be able to speak fluently, but they can sure say those cuss words perfectly clear.

Madison Wurtele [12:42 - 12:50]

What are some ways that people from the hearing community can better educate themselves on issues surrounding people who are deaf or hard of hearing?

Kim Davis [12:59 - 13:08]

I think it's best just to interact. Bring the person who's deaf and have them, you know, a part of your event.

Kim Davis [13:10 - 13:32]

If you're not sure if you should bring in a sign language interpreter or caption services, let the person determine that. Have them tell you, I need a sign language interpreter or I need a captionist. So then you can decide whether or not you want to, you know, include an interpreter or a captionist at the event.

Kim Davis [13:32 - 13:41]

Attend some deaf events. If you're leery, and you think, "Oh, I don't know if I'll be able to communicate with them," take some sign language classes.

Kim Davis [13:42 - 13:58]

Sometimes our agency will provide some basic conversational classes. I just started that with the pandemic. I've had great turnout and some of them have decided they want to continue on and to start taking classes, some non-credit courses.

Kim Davis [13:58 - 14:13]

And through their local community college, or, you know, some place like a church sometimes will offer a sign language interpreter. Maybe they'll teach classes. But there's also mentoring, finding a deaf person to mentor you.

Kim Davis [14:13 - 14:20]

There are lots of ways there. You know, there's so much information on the internet as well. The internet is our best friend, right?

Kim Davis [14:21 - 14:31]

And so there's lots of ways to, to find out information about sign language, or, you know, contact us. We have lots of resources.

Kim Davis [14:31 - 14:43]

We have a media lending library that you can borrow materials for free. Lots of things on sign language, Deaf culture, you know, just a variety of materials.

Madison Wurtele [14:44 - 14:59]

Great, thank you. And as we just mentioned, there are now sign language interpreters at Governor Ricketts' COVID-19 briefings and at the White House press briefings. What does this kind of accessibility mean for individuals?

Kim Davis [15:07 - 15:19]

Oh, it is amazing, you know, historically. This is such an inspiration to us as we feel like finally, we are a part of the community. You know, a big part of the community.

Kim Davis [15:20 - 15:36]

And we get first-hand the information without those misunderstandings. Because sometimes the captioning has mistakes or errors, and understanding the English, the speed of the captions. Lots of information can be missed.

Kim Davis [15:36 - 15:46]

Having a sign language interpreter is amazing because, again, the information is given to us in our first language and it's inspirational to be a part of the community.

Madison Wurtele [15:48 - 15:53]

Is it still important to have closed captioning even when there is an ASL interpreter?

Kim Davis [15:59 - 16:13]

Yes, because, again, not everyone knows sign language. Like I said, there are

some who identify as oral deaf, some who are hard of hearing, some who have even low vision, deaf-blind.

Kim Davis [16:14 - 16:44]

Sometimes the transcript, from the briefing, gives an opportunity to the person who's deaf-blind, who maybe can't see the captioning or the interpreter on their screen. So the transcript helps them as well, because then it can be modified to their Braille equipment, or use, and, and a screen magnifier to enlarge the screen so that they're able to see.

Kim Davis [16:46 - 17:02]

So again, a diversity of communication, a diversity of individuals, diversity of end of identifications, how they identify as deaf, deaf-blind. Am I a late deafened adult? Am I hard of hearing? Deaf plus, we call that. So there's lots of identity groups, but, in general, we say deaf, deaf-blind, and hard of hearing.

Madison Wurtele [17:10 - 17:17]

Ok, and is, is there still a gap in access to these kind of government programs and government information?

Kim Davis [17:28 - 17:34]

One big challenge is the availability of interpreters, sometimes.

Kim Davis [17:37 - 17:53]

Often it's a last minute plan, and so then to get a sign language interpreter or captionist can be difficult. So it's important to plan ahead. And, you know, sometimes I have called. I want to make an appointment.

Kim Davis [17:53 - 18:18]

My appointment is maybe three weeks later. They should immediately start the plan to find an interpreter for me as soon as I've made that appointment. You know, the the, the agency or the business is responsible for that. If they wait 1 or 2 days before the appointment, when they had three weeks to plan, they're not probably going to be successful in getting the accommodation that I need.

Kim Davis [18:18 - 18:41]

Another big challenge is the cost because, typically, you know, when you buy equipment it's a one-time cost. Where a sign language interpreter or a caption service provider is an unpredictable cost. And so that's where many businesses or agencies have to set aside and make a budget for that cost.

Kim Davis [18:42 - 19:04]

One of the biggest things is that, but by federal guidelines, if there's an undue financial or administrative hardship, you can look at that, but you have to consider your overall operating costs of the entire business.

Kim Davis [19:05 - 19:25]

So, whatever their operating costs are, compared to how much it costs to pay for a sign language interpreter or captions service provider is very nominal. So many of the businesses who are not under government agencies, they can actually get a tax credit for those expenses.

Kim Davis [19:25 - 19:39]

State, local governments—they can't, but they still have that legal obligation, under our state laws, to provide sign language interpreters. Because it's in our state laws, it is mandated.

Madison Wurtele [19:41 - 19:50]

Great. And you touched on this a little bit already, but what are some other ways we can improve accessibility in these types of programs?

Kim Davis [19:59 - 20:16]

Well, keep a current list of the licensed sign language interpreters. If you have contracted interpreters that you use, keep it current. Make sure you're updating it say every six months, or annually, whatever your agreement might be.

Kim Davis [20:17 - 20:29]

Caption service providers, as well, you can go to the Nebraska Commission to the Hard of Hearing, we have a website, a way to find sign language interpreters.

Kim Davis [20:31 - 20:56]

Those who have, who are licensed and are willing to share their contact, contact information are listed there, so then you can contact them directly. You can also use the interpreter referral agencies that are listed on our website. And those are agencies who will look and find available, licensed interpreters for you here in the state of Nebraska.

Kim Davis [20:57 - 21:22]

There's also, then, a third option, and that's Video Remote Interpreting, and that's electronically through a video platform. And we have licensed providers there. So there are three options that you can go to our website and find Service Providers. We also have a list of them so, if you need any of that, just contact our agency, and just, you know, keep it updated every once in a while.

Kim Davis [21:25 - 21:38]

We also have a list of vendors who sell technology when we have that information as well. And that's for assisted listening systems or personal assisted listening devices.

Kim Davis [21:39 - 22:00]

If they need a public phone, where can I get a public phone for people who need a special telephone for public use, or for their employees, or residents of a facility? Anyone who's overseeing that under the Olmstead Act. So there's lots of things.

Kim Davis [22:00 - 22:04]

And like I said, we have tons of resources. We are your go-to.

Madison Wurtele [22:05 - 22:21]

Well, that's great. We can link to the website below this box. So hopefully people can check, check it out there. I also want to ask you, do you have any personnel or work experiences you can share surrounding issues with communication barriers?

Kim Davis [22:31 - 22:43]

There are lots. When we, like I said, we, we have people who are deaf, deaf-

blind, and hard of hearing who reach out to us because they are having issues.

Kim Davis [22:44 - 22:58]

And we also have employers, service providers who also reach out to us, because it's, we're almost like that mediator between the two, so we advocate for both.

Kim Davis [23:01 - 23:22]

One of the biggest things is with using the video platforms instead of in person meetings because of COVID and social distancing. Video platforms—they haven't considered involving a sign language interpreter in these or putting captioning on them.

Kim Davis [23:23 - 23:48]

It depends on what type of platform you, you're using. Some of the platforms are not very user-friendly. And so we had to find out which one like a Zoom, GoTo Meeting, Google Meet. Another one is WebEx.

Kim Davis [23:49 - 23:58]

And so, you know, we've had challenges, and that's for visual, communication access for people who are deaf who rely on a sign language interpreter.

Kim Davis [24:00 - 24:23]

Then for captioning, so now more and more of the video platforms actually are enhancing their accessibility. Trying to make them so that they have some voice recognition, captioning, that auto generates the captioning.

Kim Davis [24:24 - 24:45]

Or that you can hire an interpreter and then have access to captioning. So everything is on the same screen, rather than being separate. That, I think, has been the biggest enhancement, but, or even a communication barrier we faced before the enhancements. So just access to communication.

Kim Davis [24:46 - 25:08]

And then access to communication at people's place of work, and because of

the employers concern for the cost of hiring interpreters or accommodations. So a lot of times it's from the, it's not the admin, it's basically the people at the bottom that say, "Oh, no. We can't provide this."

Kim Davis [25:08 - 25:19]

But really, that agency, or organization, or that employer—they do have that accountability to provide that effective communication. And they don't realize it.

Kim Davis [25:19 - 25:45]

And so, lot of times, upper administrative teams, they need to provide training periodically to the people who are the, you know, feet on the street, so to speak, to try to give them the knowledge, to empower them to realize that they do need to provide those accommodations, you know, policies, procedures, education, training, and that's a lot of times where we come in.

Madison Wurtele [25:47 - 25:52]

Ok, well, wonderful. Is there anything that I didn't ask today that you think might be important to share?

Kim Davis [26:01 - 26:14]

Well, I just hope people keep an open mind with communication. You know, if you're unsure how to communicate, go ahead and start a written communication with us. Try to gesture.

Kim Davis [26:14 - 26:28]

And you want to be a part of our community in our lives and you want us to be a part of yours, your community and your lives, you know, just keep that open mind that open two-way street of communication.

Kim Davis [26:28 - 27:05]

One of my favorite quotes is by Helen Keller. And she says, "Blind separates us from things. Deafness separates us from people." But I actually don't believe that now because, I mean, I understand back in her time, during her time, she was born in the what, 1890s, late 1890s, 1900s. So, close to that timeframe.

Kim Davis [27:05 - 27:13]

So, of course, we didn't have technology at that time. And now we have so much available to us.

Kim Davis [27:13 - 27:27]

We have access to everything through the Internet, on person, in person, with sign language interpreters, caption service providers. Just, we have so much. And so that has opened up that communication.

Kim Davis [27:27- 27:44]

And it really all points to attitudes. Attitudes. It's important that we change our attitudes with, with each other. Interact with each other, in whatever way that might be. So just, you know, do it. We, we don't bite.

Madison Wurtele [27:46 - 28:01]

Ok, well, wonderful. Thank you so much, and thank you for speaking with me today. We'll link to the website on this blog, and that's all for now. So, I just want to thank you again for being here, and it was a pleasure speaking with you.

Kim Davis [28:04 - 28:07]

Well thank you so much. Thanks for the opportunity. I really appreciate it.