

A SURVEY OF INTERPRETERS FOR DEAF PEOPLE IN THE STATE OF ILLINOIS*

By **STEPHEN P. QUIGLEY, Ph.D., BARBARA E. BRASEL, RONNIE WILBUR**, Institute for Research on Exceptional Children, University of Illinois

As is the case in most areas of the country, the shortage of known interpreters for deaf people in Illinois has often made it difficult to locate a qualified interpreter when the need arose. Although it was estimated that there were more interpreters than were listed in any single registry or agency list, the problem of bringing together the interpreter, agency, and the deaf client could not be solved until a comprehensive list of interpreters could be compiled and made available. The need for a survey to locate such individuals was, therefore, assigned top priority among the needs identified as existing in Illinois with respect to deaf people residing in the state.

It became obvious during the early planning of the survey that it would not be sufficient to obtain simply the names and addresses of a largely unknown population of "interpreters." Since it was likely that a large proportion of the names obtained in any survey of interpreters would be unknown to IREC staff members, there would be no way of determining whether or not the unfamiliar names belonged to qualified interpreters for deaf people unless additional information could be provided by the respondents. It was therefore decided that a questionnaire would be drafted and mailed to all individuals on the list of possible interpreters even though it was recognized that a questionnaire evaluation and classification instrument is far from satisfactory in obtaining information about an unknown individual's actual level of competence in interpreting for deaf people. A questionnaire, despite its limitations, would at least help to eliminate those whose self-reported level of skill was such that they did not

**This is a brief report of a more detailed study, copies of which may be obtained by writing to Stephen P. Quigley, Institute for Research on Exceptional Children, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801*

Dr. Quigley, Mrs. Brasel and Mr. Wilbur are associated with the Institute for Research on Exceptional Children, University of Illinois, Urbana.

feel they could function adequately as interpreters for deaf people. Asking for detailed information about the respondents would also permit a limited categorization of respondents according to their reported backgrounds and experience. In addition, a questionnaire survey would obtain valuable data from which a composite picture could be drawn of a group of people with a common, highly specialized skill—that of facilitating communication between deaf people and those who can hear. The present article is a summary report on the information compiled as a result of this survey of Illinois interpreters for deaf people, conducted by the Survey Research Laboratory of the University of Illinois under the guidance of the IREC and an advisory committee composed of four recognized leaders and experts in the field of deafness and in interpreting for deaf people.

PROCEDURES

Location of Respondents

A survey team of the Survey Research Laboratory designed and conducted a two-stage survey, employing the "Snowball" survey technique. In this technique, each person contacted is asked to provide additional names or further sources of information. The initial stage was devoted to contacting individuals, organizations and agencies who might have had contacts with interpreters, and requesting the names and addresses of interpreters who were known to the individual or agency, as well as asking for suggestions as to other possible sources of names. The second stage of the survey was the mailing of the questionnaires to all those whose names had been obtained in the first stage, along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the survey, and requesting that the survey respondents provide additional names if they could. The organizations, institutions, and agencies contacted in the initial stage of the survey were:

- Illinois Association of the Deaf
- National Fraternal Society of the Deaf
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Chicago Chapter
- Illinois School for the Deaf
- Jewish Vocational Service Agency
- Hebrew Association of the Deaf
- Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Michael Reese Hospital
- Illinois Association of Teachers of Hearing Impaired
- Illinois Association of Parents of Hearing Impaired
- Speech and Hearing Clinics
- Family and Welfare Services
- Illinois State University
- Northwestern University

INTERPRETERS FOR DEAF PEOPLE

Northern Illinois University
University of Illinois
Churches having deaf congregations
Local clubs for deaf people

By means of the procedures described, a total of 342 names and addresses were obtained and questionnaires were mailed to them. Follow-up letters were mailed to those who did not respond within four weeks of the first mailing, with a second follow-up letter mailed, if necessary, another four weeks later.

When the questionnaires were returned, it was found that six of the names on the list were duplicates of other names already on the list, and an additional nine could not be contacted, their questionnaires having been returned by the post office as undeliverable, and no forwarding address being obtainable. Deleting the duplicates and undeliverables left a corrected total of 327 names of prospective respondents, 286 (85.6 per cent) of whom either returned a completed questionnaire, or a blank questionnaire accompanied by an explanation — usually one to the effect that the respondent did not consider himself an interpreter for deaf people (11.2 per cent of the respondents), or no longer lived or interpreted in Illinois (4.1 per cent). However, the corrected response rate, 85.6 per cent, was high for surveys of this type, which may reflect the interest and concern of those individuals within the state who have had sufficient contacts with deaf people to appreciate the magnitude of the communication problem—and the need for the services of interpreters for deaf people.

Of the total questionnaires received, 52 were excluded mostly for the reasons mentioned earlier (not an interpreter, or no longer in Illinois), leaving a total sample of 234 respondents from whom usable questionnaires were received, all of whom reported having had at least some experience in interpreting for deaf people.

The responses to each item on the questionnaire were coded, punched on IBM cards, and analyzed on the IBM/360 computer in the Digital Computer Laboratory at the University of Illinois.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The 234 respondents in the survey were a group of people who were better-educated than the average, with most of them reporting at least some college education, and nearly half of them being college graduates. Two-thirds of the group were women, of an average age of 35.1 years, and one-third were men of an average age of 40.5 years. Most of the respondents reported residing in the Chicago area, although there were smaller clusters reporting from other areas in the state. About one-third of the respondents came from families with deaf members, either parents or siblings or both, but the majority came from families with no deaf members.

Most of the respondents reported having occupations in the higher

INTERPRETERS FOR DEAF PEOPLE

socio-economic levels, with professional and management personnel accounting for nearly half of the total. White-collar and skilled and semi-skilled workers comprised about a quarter of the total, with unskilled occupations represented by only 4.3 per cent of the group. Housewives (17.9 per cent) and students (8.5 per cent) comprised the balance.

The great majority of the respondents reported using manual or combined manual and oral methods of interpreting all or most of the time, with only 4.3 per cent reporting they used oral methods of interpreting mostly. Most respondents reported themselves to be good to excellent in their interpreting ability, although 9.4 per cent reported themselves to be inexperienced.

With respect to types of interpreting experience, person-to-person interpreting had been performed by nearly all the respondents (86.4 per cent). The type of situation the respondents reported the least experience with was vocational or on-the-job training, with only 20.9 per cent of the respondents having any experience at all in this type of interpreting.

The type of deaf person involved in the respondents' interpreting experiences appeared to be one of medium-to-low language ability, although there were exceptions for certain types of interpreting situations. Deaf persons with medium-to-high language ability were those most likely to be involved in workshop or conference situations, and, to a lesser degree, educational situations.

Thirty (12.8 per cent) of the respondents were themselves at least moderately hearing-impaired, but apparently had considerable experience with interpreting when called upon to function as intermediary interpreters between language-deficient deaf persons and regular interpreters who are not familiar with this type of deaf individual.

The average age at which the respondents first began having regular contacts with deaf persons other than family members was 12.6 years, and the mean age at which they first began interpreting outside their family was 20.0 years. Most of the respondents had about 17.7 years of acquaintance with interpreting for deaf people, although the data did not permit the determination of the amount of actual experience taking place during these years. At the time of the survey, two-thirds of the respondents were either interpreting regularly for an average of 16.5 hours per week, or being called upon as needed for an average of 3.8 times per month. The remainder reported that they interpret infrequently or not at all, the primary reason given being that there did not seem to be any deaf people in their localities, therefore, there were few calls for their services. Many of the latter group expressed a desire to be contacted more frequently than they were.

Most respondents learned their manual communication skills at home or by training in college or university programs or Adult Education classes.

Nearly all of the respondents (86.3 per cent) felt that organizations for interpreters at the state and local level were needed, with only a very small percentage (1.3 per cent) feeling that such organizations were not needed.)