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Abstract

Historically overlooked by training entities and professional organizations, rural interpreters are too often unable to attain the necessary and appropriately sequenced training that recognizes existing competencies, accumulates academic credentials, or acquires professional certification (Shaffer, 2013; Trimble, 2014). As educators and practitioners cultivating this vital interpreting workforce demographic, we have contributed to these gaps and are accountable. The Improving Rural Interpreter Skills (IRIS) Project is a $2.1M, five-year interpreter training grant project awarded by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration to the University of Northern Colorado's (UNC) American Sign Language and Interpreting Studies (ASLIS) department, that aims to uncover the current interpreting landscape as experienced by the rural interpreter. This paper will examine this landscape: how we got there, why it is relevant, and as a call to action so we may construct ways we can invest our efforts moving forward. Through its research, qualitative reports, and curated personal testimonies (Hardesty, 2023; Hardesty & Decker, 2022; NDC, 2019; Trimble, 2014; UNC IRIS Project 2022; UNC IRIS Project 2023), the IRIS Project articulates how collectively we have the capacity to recognize the untapped potential of rural deaf communities and support the needs of the interpreters who serve them.

Keywords: rural sign language interpreter, rural deaf community, collective accountability

Introduction

Access to quality interpreting services in rural areas across the country is undeniably challenging. Most studies on sign language interpretation tend to focus on the field in general, without explicit geographic focus. The limited published empirical studies on rural interpreters and services provided lead the authors to rely heavily on qualitative reports and personal testimonies attesting to the pervasive need for more attention on the topic.

The authors of this paper provide oversight and management of the [Improving Rural Interpreter Skills (IRIS) Project](#) with funding from a $2.1 million, five-year grant (#H160D210006) awarded by the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to the University of Northern Colorado's (UNC) Department of American Sign Language & Interpreting Studies (ASLIS). This grant was funded by RSA between the years 2021 and 2026.

Over the course of the IRIS Project, the authors have had little to no historical data to rely on while developing programming specifically aimed at addressing interpreter service-related gaps experienced in rural deaf[1] (Kusters & Friedner, 2015; Sheneman, 2018) communities and supporting the training, education, and mentoring needs of the interpreters who serve them. To illustrate this point, between 2007 and 2016 the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC) published regular needs assessment reports outlining trends and analyses of interpreter education, areas of growth, and service delivery across the country. In all the needs assessments disseminated during this period, rural interpreters were mentioned only once. The 2012 *Interpreting Practitioner National Needs Assessment Final Report* stated, "it is still concerning to see the relatively low number of interpreters in some states, particularly those with large and/or difficult to access rural geographic areas" (Cogen et al., 2013). To add to the collective understanding of rural interpreting, this paper aims to share the IRIS Project's findings to date and identify opportunities for growth within the scope of rural interpreting education, practice, and research.

To start, defining "rural" is a challenge as there is no official consensus on its meaning or parameters. Therefore, the IRIS Project compiled data from three sources to establish its working definition of rural interpreting: geographic factors designated by the U.S. Census Bureau, population thresholds identified by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and grant-specific guidance from RSA. Taken together, the following guidelines were used to identify target areas in high need of rural interpreter research and specialized training.

- The U.S. Census Bureau used four factors to determine rural locations: density per square mile, land use, distance from a city, and population threshold. Therefore, rural areas were usually considered locations outside of urban corridors with a population of fewer than 50,000 people where resources and services for individuals who are deaf were more limited (Ratcliffe et al., 2016).

- The Office of Management and Budget used residential population as its metric to designate counties as metropolitan, micropolitan, or neither. OMB defined a *metropolitan area* as having an urban core population of 50,000 or more residents, while a *micropolitan area* contained an urban core population of at least 10,000 (but fewer than 50,000). Therefore, all counties not part of a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) were considered rural (HRSA, 2020).

- Per RSA's 2021 grant application guidelines, the IRIS Project was required to identify three (3) distinct, noncontiguous areas of the United States and U.S. Territories as its geographic focus. The IRIS Project selected these three portions of the country based on the following parameters: (1) many (if not all) areas of the selected states fell within the threshold of the U.S.

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1   The term "deaf," with a lowercase "d," is used to encapsulate the multitude of identities and experiences of all people who identify as d/Deaf. This includes people who are; DeafBlind, deaf disabled, late-deafened, hard of hearing, and culturally Deaf. Deaf interpreters are written with the capitalized letter "D" to represent their linguistic and cultural expertise.

Census Bureau's definition of "rural," (2) there was limited or no access to formal interpreter education programs (i.e., degree-bearing, four-year interpreting programs within institutions of higher learning), and (3) there were disparities in the number of interpreters certified by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) as compared to other states in the same RID region (see "AC Map.").

While the IRIS Project is invested in gaining a greater understanding of rural deaf communities and rural interpreter needs across the United States, its data collection has primarily focused on the following three (3) noncontiguous areas (or 13 states) identified as *high need*: the Northeast (Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont), Southeast (Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi) and Intermountain West (Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming). Data collected from these three high-need areas were used to illustrate various points throughout this paper.

What is the Current Landscape?

There is an overall shortage of qualified interpreters in the United States (Leigh et al., 2020; McLaughlin, 2010; NDC, 2022; Olson & Swabey, 2017). This shortage is compounded by the fact that since the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for interpreting services provided over video, rather than in person, has skyrocketed (Mauldin, 2022). As reported by the IRIS Project's Council of Experts (an advisory group comprised of rural stakeholders invested in the outcomes of rural interpreter growth and education) and the IRIS Rural Deaf Community Panel (Hardesty & Decker, 2022; UNC IRIS Project, 2022), rural areas have long experienced this strain without the infrastructure of local interpreter education programs to meet the demand for qualified interpreters. Rural stakeholders' responses to a national needs assessment and data collected by RID indicated that rural interpreting communities often addressed these unmet needs by relying on the creativity and collaboration of interpreting colleagues in neighboring states and through the use of video technology insofar as it was secure, stable, and available. However, these creative and collaborative approaches were still not enough to adequately meet the interpreting needs of rural deaf individuals (RID, 2022; UNC IRIS Project, 2023).

Per the 2010 RID annual report, there were 9,083 certified members (RID, 2011), and according to the RID FY 2021 annual report, the number of certified members increased to 10,331 (RID, 2023c). This was a 13.7% increase in the number of RID certified interpreters available in the United States over the course of eleven years. Notably, this increase in RID certified interpreters was not reflected in the same way across rural America. Table 1 outlines the numeric and percentage change in the number of RID certified members over time in IRIS-identified high-need rural states. Most of these 13 states experienced little to no significant increase, with some experiencing a loss of RID certified members over time. Only 3 of the 13 high-need rural states exceeded the 13.7% national increase in RID certified members reported above.

Nevada was an exception among the 13 states with a 56% increase in RID certified interpreters, which was likely attributable to the combined wrap-around efforts of various governmental agencies and industry-related interpreter organizations (K. Beck, personal communication, May 5, 2023). These agencies and organizations included the Nevada Commission for Persons who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Nevada State Interpreter Registry, Nevada RID Affiliate Chapter, the establishment of the College of Southern Nevada Deaf Studies: American Sign Language/English Interpreting baccalaureate program in 2016, and the state-supported Communication Access Services mentorship program established in 2018 (Communication Access Services, 2021; K. Beck, personal communication, May 5, 2023). This suggests a correlation between high levels of industry-specific organizational support and an increase in rural interpreter certification.

Table 1

Comparison of Rural RID Certified Interpreters

IRIS Region	State	2010 RID Annual Report	*2021 RID Registry Results	Percentage Change
Northeast	Maine	71	79	+11%
	New Hampshire	49	58	+18%
	Vermont	29	28	-3%
Southeast	Alabama	109	109	0
	Louisiana	85	77	-9%
	Mississippi	20	22	+10%
Intermountain West	Alaska	36	31	-14%
	Idaho	61	72	+18%
	Montana	18	18	0
	Nevada	53	83	+56%
	North Dakota	18	14	-28%
	Wyoming	8	8	0
	Washington	372	422	+13%

*Figures retrieved December 2021, at the start of the IRIS Project, via the publicly available registry on the RID website.

How Did We Get There?

Individuals in rural areas often begin interpreting out of a need for communication access in healthcare, education, religious, or employment environments. Heritage signers (e.g., individuals parented by at least one signing, deaf person), individuals who are involved with the deaf community (e.g., friends, coworkers, or school employees), or those who have taken sign language classes often step up to fill these interpreting needs (Ball, 2013; UNC IRIS Project, 2023; Williamson, 2015). While the needs are great and resources may be limited, rural interpreters have unique insights and valuable experiences to offer the broader interpreting field.

Unfortunately, these insights and experiences are overlooked and undervalued. Case in point, the authors presented current findings about the identified interpreting needs of rural deaf communities and how to cultivate and support rural interpreters at the 2022 Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT) conference. This 90-minute presentation attracted less than ten attendees out of more than 200 conference-goers, all of whom were stakeholders in interpreter education. The total attendees included practitioner-educators who educate interpreters who live and work in rural settings, work with rural deaf communities over video platforms, and provide interpreting services to rural deaf individuals who travel great distances to access services in greater metropolitan areas due to a lack of resources in their own local communities. Though scholarship on rural interpreting was indeed relevant to many if not all CIT attendees, their limited attendance suggested that such resources were perhaps not recognized as applicable or valuable to their roles as interpreter practitioners and educators.

As the field of interpreting has continued to professionalize, rural interpreters have been left behind. Despite the apparent connection between high levels of organizational support and interpreter certification as illustrated by Nevada's success, many rural states have instead experienced waning support. As an

example, according to RID's 2020 Annual Report, there were 55 RID affiliate chapters (ACs) nationally (2021). As of this publication, 3 of the 13 IRIS-identified states (Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming) did not have operational RID ACs (RID, 2023a) and two others (Maine and Vermont) had restructured their ACs to operate in alternative ways after facing struggles in maintaining chapter functionality (MeSLIC, 2023; VTRID, 2023).

This example of lessening organizational support is concerning, as ACs serve an integral role as a bridge connecting the national body of interpreting standards and credentials to the local level (RID, 2020). ACs often provide the only state-based avenue for professional development, mentorship, scholarship, networking, and leadership advancement. This is especially true for rural states with no interpreter education programs and little to no systematic support for continuing education. According to RID, ACs have been struggling to remain relevant and connected to the needs of an ever-diversifying interpreter profession (2023b), and data suggests that this is especially evident for rural states. Without the support of a stable, organized affiliate chapter, rural interpreters are left in isolation with stagnating skills resulting in systemically inadequate, even discriminatory, communication access for individuals who are deaf in rural areas.

Another national interpreting organization, the National Association of Interpreters in Education (NAIE), strives to empower educational interpreters to promote best practices and enhance the education of deaf students (NAIE, n.d.a). NAIE has state ambassadors who represent members at the local level and connect with state leaders in education, deaf education specialists, as well as the educational interpreting community to help promote the mission of NAIE. Much like RID's ACs, NAIE currently has limited presence in rural states. To date, 10 of the 13 IRIS-identified rural states have no NAIE state-level representation. The three that do are Idaho, Montana, and Nevada (NAIE, n.d.b). This calls into question how and to what extent other interpreter education and industry affiliated organizations—particularly those with less publicly available membership information such as, but not limited to, the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASLTA), Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT), Mano a Mano, National Alliance of Black Interpreters (NAOBI), and National Deaf Interpreters (NDI)—are making efforts to connect with their rural colleagues.

Rural interpreters are systematically disconnected. This disconnection adversely impacts rural deaf communities. For too long, rural interpreters have been siloed out of the professional discourse. The soloing of rural interpreters has happened on multiple levels by disparate groups including state-level infrastructure, institutions of higher education, interpreting programs, interpreter educators, and organizations representing interpreter interests.

Why Is This Relevant?

Fundamental competencies in interpreting as illustrated by the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE, 2019), the Deaf Interpreting Institute (National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers, 2016), and the National Distance Learning Center (National Distance Learning Center for Interpreter Education, n.d.) embody the thematic principles of studying interpreting theory and knowledge along with practicing the development of interpreting skills (i.e., demonstration of bilingual fluency, constructing meaning, and reflective practice). Relative to these principles, the IRIS Project conducted a needs assessment in 2021 inquiring about the knowledge, skills, and abilities that rural interpreters needed to successfully interpret with autonomy (Hardesty, 2023). The findings from that assessment aligned with the above-mentioned fundamental competencies. The key difference in what rural interpreters needed was *sustainable* access to educational opportunities and the institutional support needed to create successful outcomes (Hardesty, 2023). Best practice in the field of interpreter education often takes for granted resources that are present and available in metropolitan areas but are not obtainable for interpreters in rural settings. In other words, *what* rural interpreters need may not be significantly different from their more suburban and urban counterparts, however, *how* those opportunities for education and advancement are delivered and maintained is key.

Scholars and stakeholders alike asserted that rural interpreting practitioners need training programs that acknowledge their experiences and current level of skills while providing foundational knowledge and skills to fill in the systematic gaps (Kowch & Schwier, 1997; Shaffer, 2013; Trimble, 2014). They need to be connected to colleagues, even if they are hundreds of miles away, to be a part of the profession. They need trained educators and mentors to work with them over time to improve their linguistic range and interpreting skills (Shaffer, 2013).

Furthermore, over-video interpreting has become more commonplace, creating new scenarios in which rural and non-rural interpreters work together. For example, video interpreting places rural interpreters in various non-rural settings with non-rural interpreting teams and a wider variety of non-rural deaf individuals. Conversely, this also means that the rural interpreter experience is no longer limited by geography. Non-rural interpreters with little to no firsthand knowledge of the rural landscape are engaging with rural entities (i.e., medical providers, law offices, social services) and rural deaf communities' cultures (Anderson, 2020; Gournaris, 2019; NDC, 2019).

What Can We Do (Now) to Move Forward?

There is ample opportunity for interpreter educators and practitioners to recalibrate.

1. Include geographic variation within diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility practices. Create educational opportunities that seek out the wisdom and life experiences of rural deaf communities and the interpreters who serve them.
2. Create broader systematic rural collegial collaborations. Many states that are not predominantly rural have pockets of rural communities or are neighboring states that are more rural. Recognizing these areas as underserved creates the opportunity for cross-collaboration between state or organizational entities to reach more rural interpreters and connect them with the profession.
3. Lobby for greater rural-based organizational engagement by interpreter educators and industry-based organizations.
4. When teaching online, design educational Learning Management Systems (LMS) spaces with various static and dynamic avenues for obtaining information. Internet disparity in rural areas is real, and providing variation in the development of the learning environment broadens the ability for rural interpreter engagement. These avenues include but are not limited to downloadable course materials (e.g., ePub-enabled content or slide decks) for offline review, allowing for flexible submission guidelines, ensuring institutional support in secure broadband access (e.g., [eduroam](#)), and providing individualized ongoing support for emerging technology users.
5. Host in-person educational opportunities that leverage local rural communities and deaf ecosystems. This means intentionally hosting face-to-face events, seminars, or classes that bring the content/learning to otherwise disenfranchised communities versus hosting state/regionally based events in larger metropolitan areas for the sake of privileged convenience.

How Do We Invest Our Efforts to the Future?

Research regarding rural community interpreters is an area ripe for growth. To date, there have been a handful (less than 20) of studies about rural interpreters in the United States working in both community-based and K-12 educational settings. The following research topics have been identified by the IRIS Project as areas needing further exploration:

1. Rural Professionalism. Working as a professional in a rural setting oftentimes means fulfilling

various overlapping roles in the community (Gallo, 2020; Jervis-Tracey et al., 2016). Rural interpreters face challenges in balancing their role as professional interpreters with their duty to support their local deaf community. These overlapping roles can create ethical quandaries as the lines between personal and professional lives blur. When resources are limited and needs are unmet, how can interpreters best navigate professionalism in a rural area?

2. Isolation Fatigue. In rural states where the pool of qualified interpreters is declining, interpreters know there are limited resources (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2022; UNC IRIS Project, 2023). This puts pressure on them to work in settings that they do not have the requisite skills to do. They are not afforded the ability to pick and choose what types of work they do, nor do they have an ethical support community to debrief with. In what ways does being geographically isolated create greater ethical compromise? How does professional isolation contribute to burnout?

3. Impact of Virtual Interpreting. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the interpreting industry to pivot seemingly overnight, with lingering aftereffects. With the significant shift to over-video interpreting, what implications has that had on cross-geographic teaming? Has this shift broadened more equitable access in settings that require the expertise of multilingual, heritage language, and Deaf interpreters? How has this shift impacted rural deaf communities who rely on the local pool of interpreters if they are unable to connect to broadband services, only to find those interpreters are now working exclusively in the virtual environment?

4. Workforce Development. Workforce-related programs across the country make efforts to broaden and diversify the pool of qualified rural workers. This includes the sectors of health care, education, business, and agriculture (RHIhub, 2021; USDA, 2014). What from these programs can we learn, leverage, and apply to the field of sign language interpreter education and practice?

5. Interpreter Growth. As researched by the IRIS Project (Table 1), Nevada grew its certified interpreter base by 56% from 2010 to 2021. This is a significant increase compared to the other 12 IRIS-identified rural states and the national average, according to RID annual reports. What is Nevada doing that is working? Are there lessons learned that can be transferable to other similarly situated rural states?

Historically overlooked by training entities and professional organizations, rural interpreters are too often unable to attain the necessary and appropriately sequenced training that recognizes existing competencies, accumulates academic credentials, or acquires professional certification (Shaffer, 2013; Trimble, 2014). The systematic factors that contribute to this reality have ample room for change. As educators and practitioners cultivating this vital interpreting workforce demographic, we are accountable. Collectively we have the capacity to recognize the untapped potential and connect with rural interpreters in their respective communities, where they are deeply rooted and likely to stay.

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