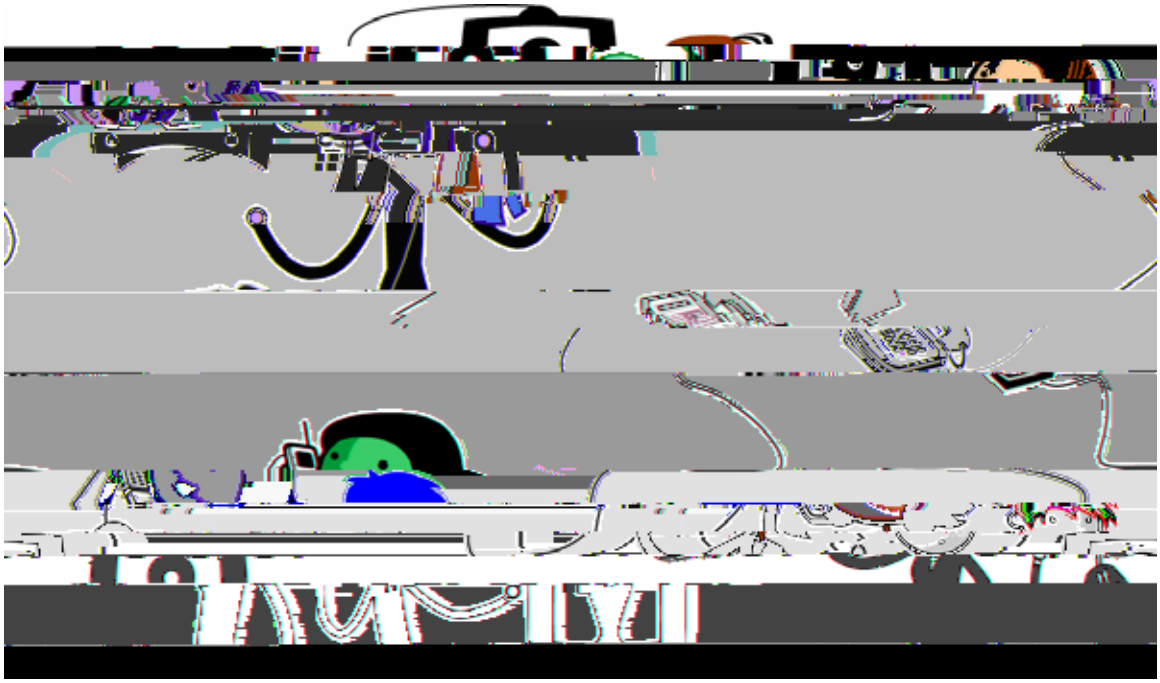
Video Relay Services Interpreting Task Analysis Report

September, 2005



Distance Opportunities for Interpret

Preface

Introduction to the DO IT Center

The Distance Opportunities for Interpreter Training (DO IT) Center is a grant-funded center serving interpreters and interpreter educators across the United States. Using technology for delivery, the Center's goal is to provide opportunities for distance learners to achieve interpreting skills and the knowledge sets necessary to effectively and appropriately apply those skills as a Sign Language interpreter. This $7.5 million enterprise has three primary projects underway (2000-2005), funded by the U.S. Department of Education and multiple State Education Agency partners.

- First, the *Educational Interpreting Certificate Program* is a thirty (30) credit hour, distance learning opportunity for interpreters who work in K-12 settings. This is a multi-state/Bureau of Indian Affairs cooperative; sixteen (16) departments of education are sponsoring interpreter-students through the program.

- The second project is focused on the needs of interpreters in a six-state Rehabilitation Services Administration region. These efforts emphasize opportunities for interpreters working with adult consumers who are Deaf and hard of hearing in a variety of community settings. As an example, an online *Legal Interpreter Training Program* (14 credit hours) is available, along with a nine (9) credit hour skill-building program, the *Diagnostic Assessment and Skills Training Series* through this project.

- The third project is national in scope. The primary objective of this effort is to teach interpreter educators around the nation how to effectively integrate technology delivery systems into their traditional interpreter training programs. Experienced educators may participate in the *Distance Learning and Technology Internship program* (6 credit hours) for a hands-on distance learning experience. This project is also exploring the current state-of-the-art of the field of interpreter education. One aspect of this project is to build

Mission

The mission statement of the Center is as follows:

> In recognition of the right of deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals to equal communication access, the Distance Opportunities for Interpreter Training Center (DO IT Center) designs and delivers quality education for and about Sign Language Interpreters.

The Center has forged collaborative partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders in an effort to fulfill the mission statement. One such collaboration involved a research project related to Video Relay Interpreting services. The remainder of this report will detail that project and the ensuing results.

Background

Purpose and Goal

The primary purpose of the research is to provide empirical evidence by identifying the required skills, knowledge, and personal attributes required by interpreters to effectively perform video relay work. The goal of this research is that the findings will provide the foundation for a thorough framework, grounded in research, on which to develop appropriate and specific curriculum for use in interpreter programs with pre-service students who aspire to a career in the field of interpreting, and perhaps a career as a VRS interpreter. As well, it can be used in the development of in-service training programs for the current workforce.

Video Relay Services

Video relay services are a relatively new service provided to deaf and hard of hearing individuals in the United States. Several new terms that are frequently used interchangeably need to be differentiated. A shared definition of terms regarding Video Relay Services (VRS), Video Remote Interpreting (VRI), and Video Interpreting (VI) is provided for the readers of this report.

VRS is a service that uses technology to conduct telephone conversations between users of American Sign Language (ASL) and English (and in some cases Spanish). Video Relay Services and its more familiar predecessor, Text Relay Services, are regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The consumers are deaf or hard of hearing individuals who sign and non-deaf individuals who do not sign or who do not have specialized video equipment for receiving video calls. Using the VRS services of an interpreter at a call center, consumers engage in the spontaneous communication involved in the telephone conversation. For example, a deaf patient may use VRS to call a doctor's office and "speak" to the receptionist. Seeing the deaf caller via video, the VRS interpreter relays to the receptionist what the deaf caller signs and signs what the receptionist says to the deaf person.

Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) on the other hand is not FCC regulated and the consumers may be at one site and the interpreter offsite, or the interpreter may be in the room with a deaf consumer and the hearing caller may be offsite. In both situations, some type of video technology is connecting the consumers with the interpreter. Video interpreting (VI) is a generic term used to describe interpreting services delivered through a videoconference system that may be either VRI or VRS.

This report is focused on Video Relay Services that are funded by fees placed on each phone bill in the country. The National Exchange Carrier Association is responsible to regulate and disperse the funds. The FCC regulates VRS services.

Research Report to the DO IT Center
Video Relay Services Interpreting Task Analysis

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March 14, 2005

"Video relay interpreters are rare commodities; they must be valued and retained."

—Video Relay Interpreter

Executive Summary

This research and resulting report on video relay interpreting were provided for the Distance Opportunities for Interpreter Training Center at Front Range Community College in Denver, Colorado. Video relay service (VRS) is a relatively new service and is provided to deaf, hard of hearing and non-deaf individuals in the United States. According to statistics kept by the National
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community and VRS. Personal attributes include physical, psychological/emotional, and professional traits.

In addition to an analysis of the interpreting process, this report also discusses implications for the deaf and hard of hearing community, and the potential impact on the interpreting profession, VRS companies, and interpreter education. Finally, recommendations for developing and maintaining a market of qualified interpreters, educating callers and conducting further research are provided.

***Note**: The researcher invented all of the specific examples used in this report so as to protect the anonymity of callers, interpreters, and managers. The specific examples used were never observed or discussed during the interviews.*

Data Collection and Process

Two VRS call centers, one operated by Sorenson and one operated by SLA-CSD, were visited in two different states. Both companies agreed to have the researcher visit one of their call centers and have access to the managers and interpreters as they became available over a three-day period. Both companies were very generous with their time and resources in allowing the researcher unrestrained access to observe and interview interpreters, managers, and administrators.

The data was collected via observation, interview, and document review. The goal of the task analyses was to capture the specific skills, knowledge, and personal attributes exhibited in VRS interpretation. A total of 55 interpreters, managers, and administrators were observed and/or interviewed using a series of questions as a framework for observations and discussions. Some interviews included discussions pertaining to specific calls and were conducted immediately following the interpretation of a call. Other interviews focused on general issues of video relay work.

In addition, deaf and hard of hearing callers were interviewed. These callers were not necessarily users of any particular VRS company. Rather they were individuals local to the area who were asked to discuss their personal experiences with video relay services. These interviews occurred both individually and in groups. A total of 25 deaf and hard of hearing callers were interviewed.

Finally, to gain a greater understanding of the context, the researcher reviewed written documentation containing FCC regulations along with company manuals and publications.

A series of open-ended questions was used to elicit conversation with the participants. All information was documented through written notes taken by the researcher. The information contained in the interviews was then analyzed for common themes and categorized according to skills, knowledge, and personal attributes.

Findings

Uniqueness

Video relay is an extremely unique form of interpreting. The most obvious element that makes it different from traditional interpreting is the fact that it is done exclusively through a different medium – video, rather than in person. Because this medium is two-dimensional and greatly relies on the availability and reliability of high-speed access, the clarity of images on the screen varies significantly. The transmission could be clear on one end, while unclear on the other. The transmission could begin very clear and then decay as time passes, interfering with the interpretation, and thus the flow of the conversation between callers.

Another area of uniqueness is the requirement for interpreters to multi-task linguistically, physically, and mechanically. Interpreters are accustomed to multi-tasking while interpreting between parties who are in the same room together. The traditional work of interpreters is to listen to non-deaf persons and interpret

Competencies

The task of video relay interpreting is extremely complex and therefore numerous competencies were identified as being necessary to perform the task successfully. As one interpreter reported,

> "Working as a video relay interpreter in a call center is different from working in other call centers like a credit card company where employees' primary role are that of operators, which does not entail interpretation working in two languages or second callers, or negotiating meaning between people. Video relay interpreting work is very demanding physically, mentally and emotionally. It requires expertise in two languages and a minimum of two cultures."

The competencies observed and discussed were divided into three groupings: skills, knowledge, and personal attributes. There was no attempt to make categories discrete, only to place the competencies in the most applicable category.

Competencies Summary

said while signing to the deaf person so that the non-deaf person didn't interrupt until after the message was interpreted and the deaf person had an opportunity to respond.

Strategies allowing interpreters extra time to process information into meaningful chunks were often employed. Because the callers cannot see each

interpretation to the deaf and hard of hearing callers. It provides deaf and hard of hearing callers equal access to information that non-deaf callers have experienced for many years.

Video relay interpreters are not only acting as interpreters, but also as operators. Their role must be made clear to the deaf and hard of hearing callers, as well as the non-deaf callers. It was confusing to deaf and hard of hearing

Decision-Making

Interpreters must constantly make decisions. In addition to the constant linguistic decisions required to relay calls, interpreters must decide on a variety of other matters. A few examples include when to call managers and other interpreters for assistance; for whom to interpret when both parties are talking at the same time; whether or not the picture clarity is sufficient to continue the call; and whether or not to accept one more call after interpreting five calls in a row, or even one 20-minute call. When making moment to moment decisions interpreters realized that decisions were not just about their own work, or about one specific call, but also the work of other interpreters in the call centers and how their behaviors based on their decisions had a ripple effect. Further, the outcome of any decision made can affect caller expectations, who may rightfully assume that the particular behavior of this one interpreter is common to all interpreters. It can affect the reputation of the company in that the behavior resulting from decision-making can add to the positive reputation of the company or take away from the reputation.

The decision to ask for assistance may be critical to the success of certain calls. Sometimes assistance is required to help understand a non-deaf caller from overseas who speaks with a strong accent. Other times assistance might be required because the hard of hearing caller is making a personal call and would prefer to have a male interpreter, rather than a female interpreter. This switch to a different interpreter cannot always be accommodated due to the nature of the call center. It may not be possible because there is no male interpreter working at the time, or the males that are working are not available to accept the call. After using one's best interpersonal skills and best practices for customer service, either the call has to be made with a female interpreter or the hard of hearing caller will have to call back at another time.

When both parties are speaking and signing at the same time, interpreters have to make choices about whom to interpret for. Is it the person who is the loudest or most forceful? Does the company have a policy that dictates who should receive special consideration? Is it the person who initiated the call? Interpreters must decide and act on their decision with tact and diplomacy so that neither caller feels less important, or feels that the interpreter or the other caller is not listening to them.

Because of the nature of technology and, at times, the lack of consistency provided by customers' equipment, the quality of transmission can vary greatly. If interpreters determine the picture quality is not sufficient, then they must decide how to handle the situation before proceeding. Alternatives include asking the deaf person to adjust the lighting in the room from where they are calling. Making sure that the interpreter's equipment is adjusted to the optimal level of clarity is also a viable solution. As a last resort another option is to ask the deaf person to call back in hopes that the next connection will have better clarity than the current connection. If interpreters relay calls while struggling with the picture quality to see the caller, interpreters are actually doing a disservice for other interpreters who will be expected to interpret for calls with the same minimal picture quality.

Part of the decision making process includes pacing oneself so that the quality of interpretation is consistent across all calls and all callers. This is important within individual interpreters, within call centers, and within companies offering video relay services. It is not fair to callers to have interpreters suffering from fatigue and negatively affecting the interpretation work. Taking regular breaks, scheduled and unscheduled, are part of the work environment. When making decisions about whether or not to take another call, interpreters must be sure they have sufficient reserves to continue a call for at least ten minutes, as per FCC regulations. The call, of course, may be shorter or longer than ten minutes, but this is the minimum. As needed, interpreters may arrange for a break. The duration of a break can last just a few minutes or include enough time to have a meal. Interpreters need to decide how long they need in order to return refreshed to the task of interpreting. The more options interpreters have available to assist them in making good decisions, the greater the likelihood of positive outcomes.

Impartiality

Experienced interpreters are versed in maintaining a sense of impartiality when it comes to the task of interpreting. When interpreters provide video relay services there is no opportunity to skip a call, like there is when deciding whether or not to accept community assignments. Because of the varied nature of calls interpreters may find themselves “pushed out of their comfort zone”. For example, interpreting for emotionally charged conversations like abortion or ending a marriage, illegal activities like selling drugs or scamming, graphic sexual conversations or even interpreting for “uninteresting” calls requires interpreters to maintain neutrality and impartiality while interpreting.

Impartiality also must be maintained whether one knows the caller or not, and whether callers are calling from the office or calling from their bedroom. These differences require interpreters to be consistent in monitoring their behaviors so that callers are comfortable making their calls and do not sense any judgment or bias.

Although impartiality is required, there are limits to what interpreters are expected to accept. When abuse is directed toward interpreters they may disconnect the call after following the company guidelines which may include telling the caller to stop the abuse or calling a supervisor to deal with the situation. At times, deaf and hard of hearing callers can be distracted from continuing the call, for example, children playing with the caller’s hair and running in front of the camera. At other times, a caller may be breastfeeding with her hands wrapped around her infant and therefore the conversation can be difficult for the interpreter to grasp. Impartiality does not mean interpret when interpreting is impossible.

Another issue that includes the need for impartiality is when deaf and hard of hearing callers have no experience working with interpreters. In some instances, VRS users call from communities where no formal interpreter education is offered. Some of these callers are used to “interpreters” who are friends, or

with the deaf and hard of hearing community, are different from video relay interpreters. Some of these deaf and hard of hearing callers hold different expectations of video relay interpreters and are disappointed or frustrated with how the communication process is executed. Interpreters reported that in this situation there is a strong urge to "help and explain" the service and interpreters' conduct to the callers.

Technology

The technology required for video relay interpreting is very unique. Each company has specific software and hardware for the transmission of the video and auditory signals of incoming and outgoing calls, and connecting callers with one another. Interpreters are required to manipulate equipment, press keys, use a mouse, and adjust cameras and headsets. For seasoned interpreters technology was reported to be the most challenging part of video relay interpreting. Once the requisite skills were mastered, less time and attention was given to technology and more attention was given to the finer points of actually interpreting calls. Less experienced interpreters reported that the technology was easier to master than the interpretation work.

On occasion, interpreters instructed callers on how to improve their visibility to the interpreter. For example, adjusting the lighting in the room or sitting closer or farther away from the camera made viewing substantially better. Also, directing non-deaf people to speak up when their voices were faint is included in dealing with technology.

Knowledge

Many of the interpreters observed employed strategies for developing their knowledge base. Some of these examples included reading about topics that they were confronted with on calls, but felt they didn't have a solid knowledge base in; keeping a log of new vocabulary items that came up in ASL and in English; personal tutoring; and sharing information on certain subjects with colleagues.

World Knowledge

All of the interpreters reported that while having excellent interpreting skills and interpreting strategies is the most important skill, having a strong general knowledge base was the second most important skill in providing effective interpretation between callers. Every call, as well as every caller, is different. Having socio-cultural knowledge and experience with everyday American culture was reported as very helpful in interpreting accurately. Having a sense of "knowing how things are done in the world" made interpreters feel capable of handling a variety of contexts and callers. Interpreters use prediction skills in navigating deaf and non-deaf interactions. Knowing how to make reservations at a restaurant, or how to hire a contractor to lay carpet, or how to make a claim on one's car insurance policy were all possible phone calls that could occur that day or week or month. The more experiences interpreters had, the easier it was to translate these experiences into helpful background knowledge required for the interpreting work at hand.

Knowing the geography and politics of not only the United States but also the world was helpful. Callers made calls to other parts of the country and the world, and spoke about traveling to other places. When interpreters were weak in geography or politics, it was evident in their interpretation. The same was true when interpreting for religious, medical or legal conversations. If interpreters had no experience with these settings, the interpreting suffered.

It is important to note that some states have laws requiring that only interpreters who hold legal certification can work in legal settings. Therefore, some interpreters although very skilled, have had no experience, or limited experience, dealing with legal matters. However, video relay services require all interpreters to interpret for whatever calls come in, including legal discussions like lawyers calling clients and discussing their upcoming case.

It is important to know how to talk about sports and use terminology like dribbling and free throws in basketball when a young child calls home to talk about the game he just won. It is useful to know how to use sexual discourse when partners who have been away from each other for several weeks start talking about their love life and how much they miss each other. There is no end to the amount of information that is helpful for interpreters to know about the world and the infinite number of topics that can be discussed via the telephone.

World Knowledge - Deaf Related

It is essential that interpreters are knowledgeable about topics related to deafness because there is a high likelihood that these topics will be discussed. For example, knowing about deaf communities in the United States, including local, state and national organizations run for and by deaf and hard of hearing people, will come in handy when callers refer to the upcoming national conference in a particular city. Also interpreters reported that having familiarity with equipment that is typically used in the community such as pagers, TTYs and vibrating alarms is also helpful. Often callers refer to these items when they give other callers information on how to best contact them or when their equipment needs repair.

Another aspect of knowledge related to the deaf and hard of hearing community is that of power dynamics between them and the non-deaf community. It is important for interpreters to understand the significance of deaf and hard of hearing people having simultaneous access to the non-deaf community. The ability to speak directly to individuals, albeit through an interpreter, provides a level playing field for many individuals for the first time. On occasion, deaf and hard of hearing people choose not to inform the non-deaf person that they are deaf or that they are calling through a video relay service. They prefer to conduct their call directly without interference from relay interpreters identifying themselves or their company. Interpreters must have the respect and flexibility within their work to provide this service.

VRS Knowledge

As mentioned earlier, interpreters must have skills and knowledge related to their work as linguistic and cultural mediators. In addition, they must possess knowledge specifically related to work as video relay interpreters working for a

for interpreters. Applying confidentiality to video relay interpreting includes not talking about the callers or the content of the calls. It also includes maintaining confidentiality about the proprietary information held by the companies where interpreters are employed. In addition, it includes not talking about co-workers and colleagues outside of the work environment. Basically everything said and done in the call center stays in the call center. Breaching confidentiality can result in immediate dismissal. Interpreters must be able to abide by this highly strict code of conduct to work successfully as video relay interpreters.

Implications of Video Relay Services

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Communities

The implications of having video relay services available to deaf and hard of

Certified interpreters reported that what they do in a 5-hour shift as video relay interpreters would take a week or a month or might not ever occur in their community interpreting work. For example, interpreting for a discussion with a lawyer on the process for getting a divorce, discussion with a doctor and patient on the medical treatment options for someone suffering from a rare disease, and talking to the principal about children attending the local public or private school might be opportunities not available to interpreters in certain communities. VRS interpreters also appreciated the opportunities to work with interpreting colleagues on a regular basis. As one interpreter stated, "VRS work actually enhances interpreters' skills, and requires additional skills and knowledge never before tapped into." Another interpreter said, "This is what certified interpreters dream of … challenge … climbing above the plateau they have been working on for years." By working on a regular basis with a variety of callers and a team of other qualified interpreters, the chances of personal and professional growth are phenomenal.

VRS Companies

Interpreters are key to the provision of video relay; therefore, VRS companies are constantly developing their work force. They are hiring at astronomical rates. They are training interpreters to do the work of video relay and at the same time they are dealing with the federal bureaucracy of having a newly regulated enterprise. They are dealing with a workforce that has primarily been underpaid and independent. They are developing standards both technically and operationally within and across call centers.

The presence of VRS call centers also had implications for the community. When call centers initially establish themselves in a particular community, they are interested in employing the most qualified interpreters they can find. This can put a drain on the local interpreter referral service if several of their experienced interpreters no longer are available to accept appointments in the local community. This being said, many, not all, interpreters interviewed stated they also continue to accept community assignments. Some of the reasons given included wanting the regular "personal touch", and recognizing the need for interpreters in the community and wanting to continue "to help out, feeling a duty or responsibility" to the deaf community.

Interpreter Education

The implications for interpreter education include the need to design, develop and deliver new curriculum that addresses video relay as a specialty area like educational, legal, and medical interpreting. Raising the bar of what is required from interpreters and what they can achieve will require highly sophisticated materials and curricula. Introducing more work into interpreter education using video samples that show a greater variety of consumers and topics will enhance interpreters' ability to generalize their skills across more diversity. Of special note is the need for working with children. Most interpreting programs follow an adult interpreting approach to curricula and have very little time devoted to working with children. VRS work includes children. Therefore, programs must begin to address this in their curricula if they prepare students to be effective VRS interpreters.

- Design, develop and implement model curricula with appropriate supporting materials (e.g., DVD/videotapes of effective and ineffective mock phone calls, signed examples of telephone number-trees and strategies for working with interpreters) for providing education to deaf and hard of hearing callers. Curricula would include learning strands related to:
  - Callers' rights and responsibilities when placing calls.
  - Telephone norms and etiquette (e.g., how answering machines and phone number-trees work, for example press #1 for accounting, press #2 for hours).
  - FCC rules and regulations.
  - VRS general policies (e.g., chatting with interpreters).
- Research in greater detail and scope exactly what this new phenomenon of VRS interpreting is and what it is not. The following areas of research would contribute significantly to the success of VRS over the next several years:
  - Create a 'best practices' document that details appropriate strategies and practices for VRS interpreters to use and seek consensus from the field, employers and consumers.
  - Identify current and desired industry standards and expectations for video relay interpreters by expanding the number of observations and interviews contained in this report to include other regions across the United States, as well as discussions with interpreters who have left VRS and no longer interpret in this environment.
  - Interview deaf and hard of hearing callers in different parts of the country to gather data that is larger in sample size and more representative of the nation.
  - Conduct interviews with non-deaf callers as to their experiences making and receiving calls through VRS to gather data that will influence training of interpreters to better meet the needs of non-deaf callers.
  - Analyze VRS interpretations to determine patterns that are effective and less effective including:
    - Customer satisfaction
    - Time saving strategies
    - Comprehension strategies
    - Strategies for dealing with a lack of context when placing calls.
    - Use of register variations to convey meaning (e.g., intimacy, emotions, urgency).
  - Analyze feedback received in various companies from callers (e.g., compliment-complaint files), if available, and feedback given to the FCC to document the systemic patterns occurring in the provision of VRS.
  - Analyze the effective of current training practices and their application by new and experienced VRS interpreters over time to the quality and consistency of services to customers.

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Conclusion

As this report indicates, there is an insufficient supply of qualified interpreters to meet the growing demands of the marketplace. This reality was present before the advent of Video Relay Services, but is more apparent as a result. The gap between the work readiness of IPP graduates and certification standards is significant, and must be addressed by collaboration between all stakeholders. The gap can and must be reduced or eliminated by the creative use of promising practices in the education and induction of new practitioners.

In addition to the recommendations made by the researcher as a result of the Task Analysis Research Project, the DO IT Center further encourages collaboration between VRS vendors and interpreter education stakeholders to increase the pool of work-ready and certifiable IPP graduates by:

- Improving the state of interpreter education through use of the CIT's Self Study Review and newly formed Accreditation process.
- Advance the state of interpreter education through the development of articulation agreements between 2 and 4 year institutions.
- Development of model curricula based on entry-to-practice competencies for implementation by IPPs, so that graduates possess work-ready competence.
- Development of a Learning Object Repository (LOR) with Units of Learning that can be utilized by interpreter educators nationwide.
- Create a system of formal induction for new/entering practitioners targeting their compliance with certification standards.

These recommendations can only be achieved through collaborative efforts between the field of Interpreter Education, VRS vendors and other stakeholders in the Interpreter Education System.

Respectfully Submitted,

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