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Sign Language Interpreters: Team Interpreting and its Ethical Consequences

By: Kelly Decker (<https://streetleverage.com/author/kdecker/>)

May 28, 2013



Accepting team assignments with sign language interpreters who continually violate the CPC is tantamount to approving and participating in ethical breeches. How

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can we better hold our colleagues – and ourselves – accountable?

For various reasons we, as interpreters, decline assignments. These reasons may include, but are not limited to: one's level of familiarity with content, a conflict of interest, a lack of availability, gaps in training, and a respect for the interpreter preference of the communities we serve. How many times is it that we decline work based on the ethics and integrity of our team?

We are all accountable for ourselves and for the ethical challenges we are faced with while working. Within this accountability is discretion about teaming – discretion that employs itself when we accept or decline work.

When an interpreter continually violates the [NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct \(CPC\)](#) (http://www.rid.org/UserFiles/File/NAD_RID_ETHICS.pdf)⁽¹⁾, that interpreter blatantly oppresses the communities we serve and is harming peoples' lives; we are all affected. I have often heard "I work with 'so-and-so' interpreter, and even though I know and have seen these behaviors that interpreter has done nothing to me."

These are comments I do not understand.

The rationale behind the comment, "... that interpreter has done nothing to me," is astounding. When interpreters are destructive on the job and breach the ethics they are bound to uphold, they are directly affecting our profession and, consequently, the communities we serve. These behaviors imply to all parties involved that this is what interpreters do and should be doing.

Doing Nothing is Doing Something

To do nothing is to passively accept unethical actions.

To do nothing is to shirk the responsibility of holding each other accountable.

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Unethical behavior takes all shapes and sizes: fraudulent business practices, threats of retaliation, withholding information from the parties involved, stealing information from the parties involved, disregarding professional boundaries while on the job, disclosing confidential information, accepting work continuously in a setting for which one is unqualified... the list goes on and on.

While the above-mentioned acts all violate the current rules-based (2) CPC, I would like to go one step further, to acts where one asserts their power and privilege while interpreting. This unethical behavior is audism. Examples of audist behavior could include, but are not limited to: using spoken English to co-opt an interpreted interaction for the interpreter's benefit, making side comments to the hearing participants unbeknownst to the Deaf individual(s), having rudimentary language fluency, ignoring the request for a Deaf interpreter, and possessing minimal Deaf world cultural context, all of which are tactics of [disempowerment](http://www.streetleverage.com/2012/12/deaf-disempowerment-and-todays-interpreter/) (<http://www.streetleverage.com/2012/12/deaf-disempowerment-and-todays-interpreter/>) (3).

As Lewis Merkin points out in his recent [vlog](http://youtu.be/XleSlSmOylg) (<http://youtu.be/XleSlSmOylg>) (4), audism can be experienced in many forms, some even covert. As we take a deeper look into why and when we turn down work, we also need to consider that accepting assignments with an unethical interpreter as your team is a form covert audism.

While working in a teamed situation we are seen as one. When we choose to work with unethical interpreters we are clearly showing, to all parties involved, that we have consented to work with these individuals and that we support each other. This consent condones past behaviors, supports current ones, and perpetuates the opportunity for further occurrences. When we accept work with unethical teams we are complicit in the infractions; what's more, we are reinforcing the offers of work available on teamed assignments.

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(https://streetleverage.com/live_presentations/sign-language-interpreters-embody-the-change-you-want-to-see/)

The Current Frame for Ethical Guidance

During the 2012 RID Region I Conference in Atlantic City, NJ, RID Ethical Practices System (EPS) ⁽⁵⁾ representatives gave an overview of EPS policies and procedures, as well as the occurrences of grievances filed within the past few years. The number of accepted complaints was in the single digits.

These representatives explained that, though they receive dozens of grievances, many grievances are not accepted due to the following: time lapse since the occurrence, complaints against working, but not RID-certified interpreters, and/or complaints against interpreter agencies.

In my mind, the EPS procedure is inordinately lengthy. In order for any person to file a complaint, one must have a comprehensive understanding of the [37 page handbook](http://www.rid.org/UserFiles/File/eps_manual_Updated5.13.pdf) (http://www.rid.org/UserFiles/File/eps_manual_Updated5.13.pdf), and trust the system from which it originated.

Could this be the reason the number of grievances are in the single digits?

Case in Point

A couple of examples.

Example One

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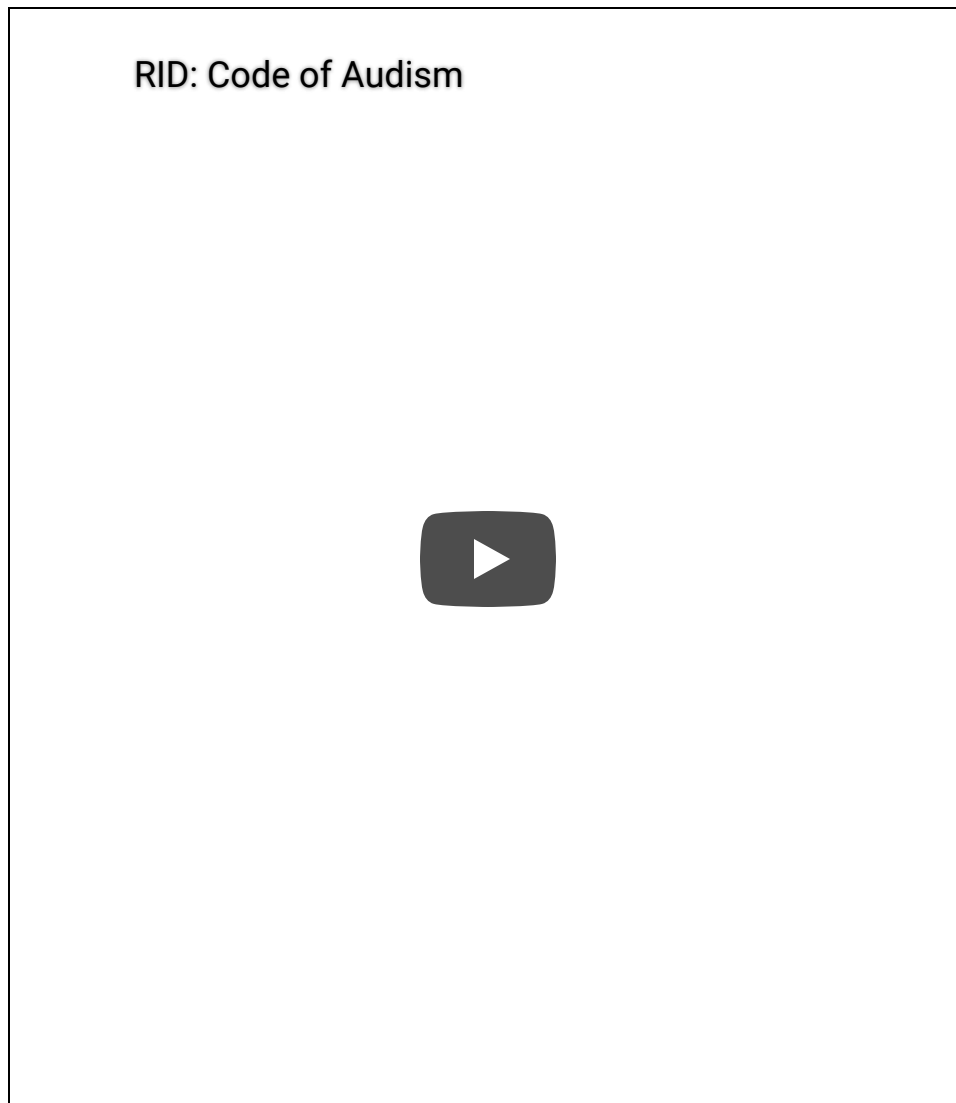
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(reference at approximately 3:04 and 5:20 into video)

As is indicated in example one ⁽⁶⁾, RID's response to the grievance was that the 90-day time limit was up, and that "This case will now be dismissed and she [the interpreter] will not be notified of this." What is the rationale for not notifying the interpreter that a grievance had been filed against her? Notification would make the interpreter aware that the decisions she is making are causing harm and, albeit past the 90-day limit,

a grievance has been filed against her. Instead, by doing nothing, her behavior has been endorsed.

Example Two



As we see in example two ⁽⁷⁾, the grievance was filed and a request was made for expediency due to the severity of the situation and extenuating circumstances. Even so, the process took two years for a final decision. Within this final decision the interpreter was cited to have violated four of the seven tenets within the CPC. The resolution to the matter – the interpreter is to take an online course.

Unfortunately, this system sends a clear message that the Deaf experience of prolonged encounters with egregious and oppressive interpreter behavior, two years of costly waiting, and

four serious violations of the CPC, all amounts to a measly slap on the wrist and an online course.

To me, this is hardly a resolution.

While the number of public grievances may be small, unethical behavior is still running rampant. As it stands, RID is the sole vehicle to certification. Revoking someone's certification as a sanction for unethical behavior is critical to protecting the value of certification.

What Should be Done?

As interpreters, we have the duty to make decisions based on discretion. This discretion is powerful. We have the ability to choose where, when, and with whom we team and work. If the people with whom we work create discord in our ethical conscience, it is time to reevaluate.

Suppose we were to reframe the ways in which we accept work? What if we all stood on the grounds of doing the most good and upholding the linguistic rights of the communities we serve and ultimately are a part of, (8) each and every time?

We may be faced with discomfort in telling an agency or a requestor: "I am available, but I have an ethical conflict with this interpreter. Therefore I am unable to accept this assignment." In doing so, we are taking the initiative to create change (9) and shift the paradigm.

We may be met with resistance since we are "that interpreter" who questions teaming decisions made by the gatekeepers in our profession. The beauty of that resistance is the opportunity for dialogue and deeper exploration as to why ethical teams and practices matter.

I invite you to be the catalyst for an ethical support community and delve into this idea of declining work based upon the unethical history of our potential team. In this ethical support community, let's talk about how this idea and practice affect us

as individual practitioners, affect the communities we serve, affect our overall working rapport, and ultimately, reflect our accountability.

What lasting impression will you create?

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Kelly Decker
(<https://streetleverage.com/author/kdecker/>)

Kelly is highly invested in the development of the interpreting field. She has coordinated and implemented countless community based projects and events. Kelly has been working throughout Region I in private practice since 2005. As an Integrated Model of Interpreting (IMI) practitioner, Kelly is involved in the dedicated practice of professional dialogue at the Etna Project.



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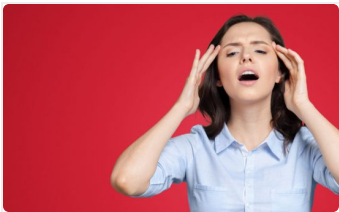
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Wing



Fantastic thoughts here Kelly. I haven't ever thought of my "teaming" as an endorsement of my team's legitimacy and skills. In many ways I am humbled by those who have willingly teamed with me, offering me a subtle endorsement by

action. Your article provokes a more careful review who I team with. Thank you for your thoughts.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Wing – I appreciate your thoughtful comments. The more places we have to share and engage in dialogue, such as Street Leverage and within our own ethical communities, the more we are able to sift through the intricacies of the decisions we make.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Shelly Hansen



Hi Wing and all~

I have teamed many times as a mentor to a newer terp...certified or not certified. The person usually expresses gratitude that I teamed with them, providing support etc... That is one of the most common mentoring opportunities for interpreter post ITP/IPP.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Karen



I agree with you 100%. I feel as though I have been fighting this battle for a long time, and have felt alone while doing it. I certainly don't claim to be the best/most skilled/always make the best decisions interpreter, but I have often challenged my peers with this exact sentiment: that by accepting work with someone who is not qualified and unethical, you have identified yourself as someone who approaches your work in the same way. By saying nothing, you are endorsing the behavior. Thank you, Kelly, for writing about this in such a clear and thoughtful way.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Karen – Thank you for sharing your feelings and experience. I certainly can appreciate the feeling of possibly being the only one that feels this way. With your comments and others on this article I suspect we have created a starting place.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Shelly Hansen



Hi! Thanks for posting! My quick response is: the goal is quality interpreters acting ethically. How do you get from point A to point B? There is a type of power in declining work because of the team. My question is how does that serve to 1. educate that interpreter on changes that need to be made 2. Increase access for D/HH (by declining for an ethical reason based on team may mean job goes unfilled/is cancelled which does not serve the D/HH person) 3. Increase collegiality and working together, mentoring and building community I think there should be a... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Shelly – I think the first step is recognition, whether that be within ourselves or in the practices we see in the teams we work with. After that recognition, we need to hold ourselves accountable to talk about it and be change agents. This can take many forms: engaging in local interpreter dialogue, hosting a community based forum, inviting agencies in on the discussion, the possibilities are endless. The more that we talk about it and bring the issues to surface, albeit uncomfortable, the more we can make progress. I am an optimist at heart, and truly believe that the... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^

wrossi66



I have always been direct with agencies about a team I will not work with on an assignment. I feel that if all Interpreters do that, that a particular Interpreter would find themselves without work, then, they would need to re-evaluate to

find out why that is the case. I have also found that a lot of Interpreters do not post conference with each other. I always do, as well as a lot of the teams that I work with regularly. You are both able to have an exchange of what worked well and what did not work well. It... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Peggy



Thank you for this suggestion, Shelly! I'm a little uncomfortable with such a direct approach, but it would be helpful to have some way of providing feedback and support that is confidential yet indirect. Perhaps a mechanism by which feedback can be given to one another. A national online registry or blog? Perhaps a mandatory registration so that reviews/feedback (good and "bad") for all interpreters can be shared with them (not public)? If it is mandatory it won't be only the interpreter interested in their professional behavior would receive reviews, but everyone will have an avenue to feedback with less... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^

Shelly Hansen



Hi Peggy~ I meant it to be a completely private option via the RID website. Not open to anyone reading anything except for the receiving interpreter and RID internal staff IFF a grievance is filed or commendation for some award for professional service (if that was an option). I value RID certification, am glad to be certified, and want to improve RID. I think a separate "Angie's list"...as I recall, that what the "In My Lingo" site was aimed at doing...seems too fraught with potential bias, ability to be misused etc... I'd much rather give and get feedback from other... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Dawn



Kelly, I very much appreciate this article and I agree with you on your points made here. I will turn down jobs based on the fact I have an ethical conflict with an already assigned team. When other interpreters express frustration/anger/resentment/embarrassment regarding a recent team experience or repeated experiences of bad behaviors from a team I encourage them to stop accepting assignments with those people, that they are simply endorsing the

behavior if they continue to work with them. They almost always respond that they are afraid to lose work if they do this. This is the number one reason... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Dawn – Utilizing discretion and not accepting work based on unethical teams is not easy, there are a number of factors to consider. One of which you mentioned – losing work. While on the surface I agree that this is a dilemma, I ask us to look at the longer term. When we accept work with unethical teams we continue the possibility of work being offered to them, and consequently furthering the harm. I hope this article can be a springboard for your community to dialogue about the short and long term effects on our communities, teaming practice and profession.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Stephanie Merchant



Kelly,

Can you clarify what you mean by “using spoken English to co-opt an interpreted interaction for the interpreter’s benefit”?

Thank you.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Sure, thank you for asking.

Lets suppose there is an interpreted interaction and the conversation (at the moment) happens to be in English. When the interpreter adds in their own comments to the conversation it shifts the conversation to the interpreter – thus co-opting the interaction.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^

Stephanie Merchant



Ah, thank you.

If I wish to email you privately, how may I do so?



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Stephanie – I believe I've been able to find your email address on the RID database. Feel free to check your inbox.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Carla Dupras



Hi Kelly...

I'd like to re-publish your article in our local chapter newsletter. I have a few questions, though. Is there a way I can contact you directly?



🕒 5 years 10 months ago

john hendricks



Great article! Thanks Kelly.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago



I am in that article -
AllDeaf.com



[...] I am in that article Sign Language Interpreters: Team Interpreting and its Ethical Consequences | Street Leverage [...]

Terri Hayes



Wow. In this area there are a couple of interpreters who have been working for years and years and years – and Everybody (Deaf and hearing) believes them to be unethical. (Deaf people have even filed formal complaints with RID but somehow they still hold certification – and they still carry on with Business as usual)... Interpreters decline to work with these people – indeed they/we do... – but still they work. Whats more – they work – A LOT... ALONE (where their infractions are not witnessed and nothing nothing nothing can or will be done to resolve the issue... [Read more »](#)

 5 years 11 months ago 

Marcia Reaver



Terri,

I am aware that those interpreters are out there. If you want to email me privately I would like to have a further discussion. If any of them are contracting with us I would like to be aware of who they are so I can address the issues at hand with them directly.

 5 years 11 months ago

Kelly Decker



Terri – You've mentioned a number of long standing issues, and some awareness by both the interpreting and Deaf communities where you live. Have people gotten together to talk about what you are seeing as common practice, what we understand as standard practice and how one can bridge the gaps? Another question I had is, and I am glad Marcia responded to your post, are agencies being made aware of these on going issues? Lastly, from your post its seems as though this has been something you've grappled with before. I wonder, with the frame of a rights based approach... [Read more »](#)

 5 years 11 months ago

Shelly Hansen



Hi Terri~ Glad you brought up the isolation factor. That is true too. Terps can choose "to never team"...a red flag. They can live for years in an area without interacting with any other interpreters. You are right...there is a market and they will keep working. I think there needs to be another way to deal with it because I think this technique of "protest" by not teaming has been tried by many and hasn't made a difference. More powerful from my experience has been when the Deaf/HH person notifies a referral agency with a list of preferred interpreters and... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Shelly Hansen



One more thought...to not team is like a teacher saying I don't want anyone in my classroom while I am teaching. Avoidance of accountability. Also, how is this idea of declining to team different from black-listing? What if there was a peer form that you could download from RID, fill out submit to RID and to person as a "peer review" that was not a formal grievance, but a general peer review. Then you could email to interpreter and open a dialogue for both positive and negative feedback. If I had a great teaming experience, can review that as well... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^

Shelly Hansen



My husband at work can get a peer "ALTY"...a little thank you. What if on the RID website there was an option to send a positive comment on interpreter service. Also a separate spot to send feedback review.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^

Shelly Hansen



The plus for this kind of approach would be there would be more of a long term file that RID could review in the case of an actual grievance being filed. This would provide a fuller picture

of feedback from a range of perspectives (peers, D/HH persons/agencies/employers). The only time it would be reviewed by the Ethics board would be in the event of a grievance or if there was another zone for exceptional commendation? An interpreter could be nominated for exceptional service award?



🕒 5 years 11 months ago



Kelly Decker



Shelly – You've brought up a number of points and ideas. I'd first like to address the idea that when we turn down work due to unethical teams, we do so in telling the requestor/agency why (as suggested in the article). That way it begins the dialogue. By no means is it a silent protest. As suggested in the article, our current frame of ethical governance is fraught with red tape and stems from a place that people do not trust. To further expect peer reviews and/or feedback from RID will only further bog down the system. We are our... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Marcia Reaver



I wasn't aware that people actually took assignments when they felt that the team would be unethical. Team means "we" not "me." Any teamed assignment means you are presenting one work product where you both share the integrity of the message and all that is inherent in ethically interpreting the message. I guess I live in a sheltered world, but as an agency manager I feel we need to disclose the name of the team as a part of confirming the assignment. If an interpreter chooses to not work with the other interpreter I need to do a little fact... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Mark Alan English



I applaud Kelly's topical and thought provoking article about what it really means when we stay silent, look the other way and continue to partner with colleagues who have documented unethical behavior, or behaviors we've personally witnessed on the job. Issues of audism and

disempowerment matter. I can speak first hand about the RID grievance process. There is much that I respect as thoughtful and thorough. There is room for serious improvement on execution, timeliness and sanctions. I agree with Kelly that the procedure is inordinately lengthy. It's unacceptable and ineffective. Most unsettling is the pattern of adjudications that are... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Shelly Hansen



From RID's perspective, they have done such a rigorous pre-screen (written, interview, performance) assessment that these egregious issues of incompetence, total disregard for best practices, CPC etc... shouldn't be occurring.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^

Terri Hayes



what a joke



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Karen Piggott



Extremely thought provoking and emotional. Dottie Griffith's vlog touches the heart of the Deaf world. This is not the 1960s or 70's for gosh sake. Yes, the Deaf need to be encouraged as well to learn the process, to speak for themselves; Learn what they need to do. Yes, Paul Shreeman's vlog on his own personal experiences in attempting to rectify a situation with an unethical/credentialized interpreter indicates the strength of his identity. Yet, being met with a miserable outcome from the national agency we all look to for underscoring our credentials and ethics is disheartening to say the least.... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago



Betty Colonomos



Hi Kelly, Thanks so much for bringing this chronic problem to light with an emphasis on action. The fact that this situation continues on and impacts so many of us, consumers and interpreters alike, underscores that what we have been doing isn't working. As you suggest, we need to address these issues with multiple resources. We need to recognize those agencies who investigate and honor complaints from team members. By publicly acknowledging people who do the right thing with integrity, it becomes a value and a norm. Professional interpreters with these standards could have a website (ala Angie's list) and... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago



Betty Colonomos



In case it is not apparent, I want to remind readers that for many of us "unethical behavior" is not limited to violations of confidentiality or acts of audism. People who accept jobs and then on site proclaim "I don't do voicing" are also hurting consumers and our profession. Similarly, accepting assignments that one is clearly not qualified for (without disclosing and getting approval first) fits into this category too. We should not throw up our hands in frustration because people are still being hired. If we persist and become a force for good, we will prevail. It takes hundreds... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Betty – Thank you for the additional examples. I can't help but to think about, how much I'd like to have a conversation about integrity and what that means on a personal and community level and how ethics, how ever that's defined, ties into that. So much food for thought.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Peggy



Excellent article and thought-provoking replies! Critical review of a professional's work is a sensitive issue, and I'm glad to see this discussion here on Street Leverage. RID's grievance process is meant to provide due process for certified members being accused of violations of the CPD, but, as pointed out a few times here, is limited in scope and consequences. However, a direct and public "you shouldn't-a-done-that" approach leaves the field open for

frivolous accusations. I like the idea of an "Angie's List" or other registry that allows for moderated feedback that is accessible to the accused party. This can be... [Read more »](#)



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Gerdinand



What's Angie's list?
Can someone point me to a clear reference?
Thanks in advance.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Gerdinand – You can find Angie's list at <http://www.angieslist.com> (<http://www.angieslist.com>) It is a website that are customer based reviews of services ranging from tutoring services to primary care doctors.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago

Warren Baim



Love this article... I've felt the same way about agencies that behave unethically.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^

Trudy Gilbert



Excellent article! Thank you Kelly. Isn't it also true that accepting work from unethical agencies is also a form of Audism and perpetuating the harm being done? Drawing the line by not accepting an assignment with an unethical interpreter is one step, however the unethical agency is capable of doing greater harm to more people. Nothing is stopping them, and interpreters continue to work for them. If RID did finally attempt to

address agencies, then perhaps agencies may also have to take an online ethics course.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago ^



Kelly Decker



Trudy – Well said (other than the online course – smile), and to further complicate matters are agencies specializing in spoken language translation services that are now procuring ASL interpreting services. For all of those who are attending this years RID National Conference ISM (Interpreting Service Managers), Deaf Caucus, and Interpreters with Deaf Parents (IDP) are coming together to talk about this very issue. I anticipate it to be rich and worthwhile discussion.



🕒 5 years 11 months ago



Sign Language Interpreters and the Future of Ethical Practice | Street Leverage



[...] area ripe for dialogue is the appropriate consequences for violations. In her article, Sign Language Interpreters: Team Interpreting and its Ethical Consequences, Kelly Decker asked a very important practical question about when we should we avoid teaming with [...]



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