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# Current teaming practices in video relay service

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**Current Teaming Practices in Video Relay Service**

By  
Stacey Lyn Rainey  
A thesis submitted to  
Western Oregon University

In partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of:

Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies

June 2013

EVALUATION PAGE

The undersigned members of the Graduate Faculty of Western Oregon University  
have examined the enclosed thesis entitled:

**Current Teaming Practices in Video Relay Service**

Presented by: Stacey Lyn Rainey

A candidate for the degree of: Master of Arts, Interpreting Studies

And hereby certify that in our opinion it is worthy of acceptance in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for this master's degree.

Signatures Redacted for Privacy

Date: June 4, 2013

Chairperson:

Committee member:

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Director of Graduate Programs:

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I saved this section of my paper for last. One reason is because one of our professors in the program strongly suggested that I save it until the end since it is possibly more fun to write than the rest of the thesis. Smile. And reason number two is because putting into words all of the gratefulness and thankfulness I have seems like an impossible task. I honestly don't know where to begin ...

I want to thank my classmates of the first year cohort of the Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies at Western Oregon University. You are all amazing individuals and I am honored to have spent the past two years on this incredible journey with each of you. This program has been full of growth and challenges for me both personally and professionally. For that, I thank you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Current Teaming Practices in Video Relay Service**

**By**

**Stacey Lyn Rainey  
Master of Arts in Interpreting Studies  
Western Oregon University  
June 4, 2013**

The field of signed language interpreting is a young profession. Professionally recognized in the 1960s, American Sign Language/English interpretation has been through much change and growth over the years. At the beginning of the profession and still to this day, the most prevalent settings where interpreters work are in the community and educational systems, as well as the medical field and performing arts, to name a few. Interpreters often work alone, although sometimes interpreters are placed with another interpreter during certain assignments. This is called teaming or team interpreting.

Since the early 2000s, there has been fast growth in technology and a new means of communication has launched for the deaf community to use American Sign Language (ASL) in communicating with hearing people through a professional signed language interpreter. This innovation is called Video Relay Service (VRS). VRS facilitates the communication of a deaf and a hearing person to communicate over the phone via a professional ASL/English interpreter. Communication between the two parties is possible with a webcam or videophone using American Sign Language and a phone line using spoken English. The Video Interpreter (VI) has the complex task of processing calls between persons with two languages and cultures, as well as operating the technological demands and interpreting, all at the same time. Often the VI does not have any idea what

the call will be about, or the goal of the conversation. Now imagine putting a second interpreter into this situation. Teaming in VRS compared to working in the community looks very different. In this study, the following questions are asked: “Do teaming practices exist within VRS?” and, if so, “What are current teaming practices within VRS?”

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background**

Often when two people work together, it is for a common goal. Now, in situations in which neither party knows the context of the situation, this task is more complicated. Imagine now, working between two different languages and cultures to achieve that common goal, even more complex. Team interpreting as defined by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf is “the utilization of two or more interpreters who support each other to meet the needs of a particular communication situation” (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2007). Teaming can be especially complex in the field of interpreting. When it comes to teaming within the specific setting, of Video Relay Service (VRS), the definition becomes even more unique. It is, anecdotally, known in the professional interpreting community that most interpreters who work in VRS have many years of experience in a variety of settings before entering the VRS line of work. Personally, I did not start working in Video Relay Service until my third year of professional interpreting. Even then sometimes, I did not feel I was ready for the task at hand. (No pun intended.) Most VRS companies require certification and/or professional development prior to employment with a VRS company, to assure that the Video Interpreter (VI) is actively involved in his or her professional growth as an interpreter (RID, 2007).

It is estimated that more than 4,000 signed language interpreters have worked in the VRS settings (RID, 2007). When a Video Interpreter answers a call, it usually starts out with just the VI and the deaf customer who is using sign language. The VI sits in his/her own station with a computer, a headset and high speed Internet connection hooked up to the computer and a webcam or videophone (see Figure 1). A VI might ask for

support on a call for a variety of reasons, such as on 911 calls, conference calls, calls with technical jargon, detailed call content, poor video quality, unfamiliar accent of the hearing customer or signing style of a deaf caller, among others. Adding a fourth person, an additional VI, to the mix can be extra challenging, and often there is no prescribed course of action when a team is requested, whether at the beginning of the call or during a call. In this research, I am interested in finding out what the current practices are, if there are any, within the VRS setting. By having a set of standards or effective practices, the use of a team in VRS could perhaps be more successful and less stressful for all involved.

### **Statement of the problem**

This research is important because having a set of teaming practices in VRS could alleviate some of the work-related tension within the VRS setting. At this time, there are no documented standards for teaming practices within Video Relay Service. In my experience, it is usually a guessing game or an attempt at mind reading to figure out how to help the “on-camera” VI during the call. Because most of the calls are handled using simultaneous interpreting, there is often no way for the interpreter to “pause” the conversation to then ask for help from the team interpreter. Everything to process the call is happening all at once. There is little to no time for discussion of what is needed from the team interpreter. The end goal of this research is to learn whether or not teaming practices exist in VRS and, if they do, what the current teaming practices are. Ensuring a win-win situation for everyone involved could result in more satisfied interpreters and more satisfied customers. Interpreting in VRS is, anecdotally, known to be one of the hardest venues of interpreting within the field of ASL/English interpretation. Interpreters are often working alone in a workstation while interpreting a variety of phone calls

between deaf and hearing people. When a video call comes in, the interpreter usually has no idea what the call content will be. Additionally, he or she is often dealing with cultural mediation between two people who may have completely different backgrounds. Not only is there the technology piece of operating the computer intermittently while interpreting, but attention must also be paid to the customer service aspect of the transaction – being polite, friendly and providing excellent interpreting service in both English to ASL and ASL to English. When a VI asks for a team to come help with the call, oftentimes the team person has no idea what is going on within the call.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to discover whether there are teaming practices and what those current teaming practices in Video Relay Service are. By gathering this information, standards may be implemented to make the teaming situation as smooth as possible for interpreters working in the VRS field. This research is at the very beginning stages, since little research has been done about VRS, either in general or specific to teaming. This is just the tip of the iceberg and more research will be needed.

### **Theoretical basis and organization**

The theoretical basis of this research is a qualitative study to examine how the interactions of interpreters working together in VRS play in the role of teaming. By approaching this study using a qualitative method, I was able to hear experiences and learn about situations that are happening presently at a VRS call center. Since there is little to no research on this subject, my research started with looking into strategies and multitasking while simultaneously interpreting, handling stressors that arise in an interpreted setting and general VRS practices. Observations were conducted as well as

interviews with current VIs working in the field of VRS while taking extensive notes on the teaming experiences the VIs reported. After gathering the data from the observations and interviews, I then coded the data to see what commonalities and differences are found among VIs who work in VRS regarding teaming practices.

Using references from the professional organization, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), and resources from professional interpreter educators, practicing interpreters, and interpreter researchers, provides a strong foundation upon which to base interpreting in the Video Relay Services setting.

### **Limitations of the study**

The first limitation of this study is the number of participants and overall sample size. Given that only fourteen interpreters were observed in one call center and three interviews were conducted, generalizations cannot be made that the same teaming practices are happening at every call center in the United States. This research was conducted on a very small scale, utilizing only one Video Relay Service call center from the many all over the nation. Further research would need to be conducted to determine other teaming practices that might be occurring in other places, and between other VIs. Another limitation is observations only took place during an evening shift and a weekend shift. This research is based on a single call center, and the instances provided throughout this research are based only on the participants in the study. Starting the conversation about teaming within VRS could open the door for more discussions.

## Definition of Terms

To clarify the terminology used throughout the study and the specific purpose of this research, following is the list of terms that may not be familiar to all audience members.

- *Video Relay Service* is defined by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) which regulates and compensates the service, “a form of Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) that enables persons with hearing disabilities who use American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate with voice telephone users through video equipment, rather than through typed text. Video equipment links the VRS user with a TRS operator – called a ‘communications assistant’ (CA) – so that the VRS user and the CA can see and communicate with each other in signed conversation. Because the conversation between the VRS user and the CA flows much more quickly than with a text-based TRS call, VRS has become an enormously popular (Federal Communication Committee, 2011). In other words, VRS allows deaf and hard of hearing people who use signed language the ability to communicate through a professional signed language interpreter, and can do so with hearing persons who are not in the same area. Video Interpreters interpret phone calls between deaf and hearing people all over the United States of America as well as international regions. VRS is relatively new to the field of signed language interpreting.
- *Teaming/team interpreting* is the utilization of two or more interpreters who support each other to meet the needs of a particular communication

situation. Depending on both the needs of the participants and agreement between the interpreters, responsibilities of the individual team members can be rotated and feedback may be exchanged” (RID, 2007). When two or more interpreters work together it is commonly understood by professionals in the field of interpreting as “team interpreting,” “teaming,” or “working in a team.”

- *Video Interpreter or VI* is an interpreter who interprets in a VRS call center and processes calls between deaf and hearing persons via webcam/ videophone and a phone line through high speed Internet. The nature of the video communication in VRS is two-dimensional, meaning communication is happening on a computer screen rather than three-dimensional, as you would see in the “real” world with little technology involved.
- *Two-dimensional (2-D)/VRS world or three-dimensional (3-D)/“real” world/community* is how interpreters working in VRS refer to the type of work they do. The interviewees referred to the 2-D or 3-D world during their interviews. Two-dimensional (2-D) is usually the VRS setting, while the community, or the “real” world setting, is commonly known as 3-D. This refers to a place separate from the VRS call center, usually with people together in the same location while the interpretation is happening. In VRS, the hearing person, deaf person and the VI cannot all be in the same room together ([www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov)).
- *Standard practice*, for the purpose of this study, is an action that the majority of the practitioners are doing. This definition was not shared with



participants of the study. It is necessary to have a working definition for “standard practice” to establish a basis for research and data collection.

- *On-camera interpreter* is the “main” interpreter in front of the deaf person on the call. That is the interpreter who is actively interpreting the call between the deaf and hearing customers.
- *Team interpreter or team VI* is the interpreter who comes over to support and/or help out the on-camera interpreter. Most of the time, the team interpreter is the one monitoring the floor in case someone needs help during a call.
- *Feed or feeding* is information that is shared or exchanged during the call from the team interpreter to the on-camera interpreter (or vice versa). Information is being “fed” to the interpreter working in front of the camera in either English or American Sign Language.
- *Floor* is the area in the call center where the main computer and desk are stationed as well as the area where the support VI monitors the VIs who are processing calls and is ready to team when necessary.
- *Gloss* is “defined as English word or words used to represent a particular ASL sign relying on its most common meaning. GLOSS is not a written form of ASL, rather it represents common English equivalents of ASL signifiers” (Lewis, 2007, pg. 141).
- *Debriefing* occurs after an interpreting assignment, whether it is in the community or in VRS, interpreters may sometimes take a few minutes up to a half hour or more (depending on the interpreting assignment) to talk

afterwards about the interpreting process and how the exchange of information seemed to go. Debriefing is a common occurrence within the interpreting profession.

- *Station* is the cubicle-type area where the on-camera VI sits to process incoming and outgoing calls from deaf or hard of hearing customers.

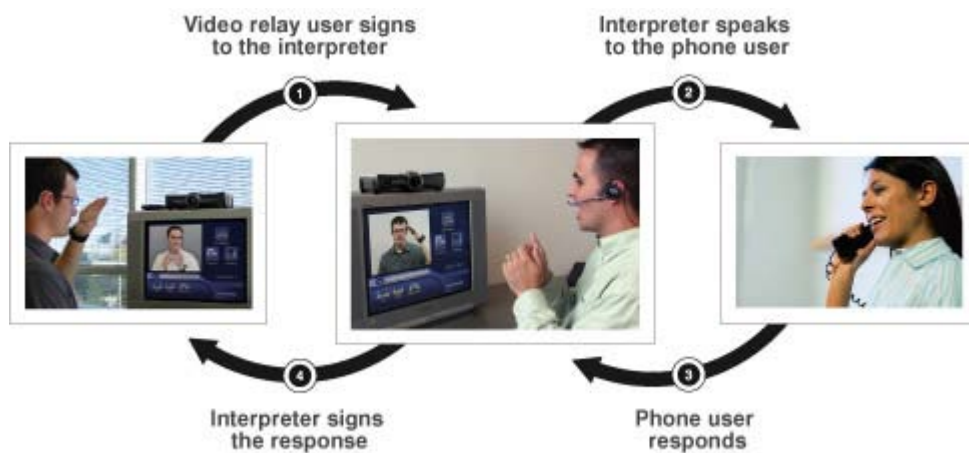


Figure 1. *Video relay system*. Source: [www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov), retrieved May 22, 2013 (as cited in Brunson 2011).

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As mentioned earlier, interpreting in Video Relay Service (VRS) is, anecdotally speaking, one of the most challenging areas within the field of signed language interpreting. Because of the rapid increase in customers utilizing VRS, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf anticipates increases in the volume and desire for the service (RID, 2007). Because of the limited information on the topic of Video Relay Service and teaming, I have chosen to address some of the components involved with the actual interpreting work itself, and the communication that happens between the two interpreters and general practices within VRS. RID has multiple documents relating to professional interpreting called “Standard Practice Papers.” The two that I focused on for this study are *Teaming* and *Video Relay Service Interpreting*. In either of these documents, the subject of teaming in VRS is scarcely mentioned. According to Brunson (2011) in his book titled *Video Relay Service Interpreting*,

Sign language interpreting is about access. The simplicity of the statement, however, belies the actual work that goes into producing, facilitating, and providing access. ... while the interpreter is the one ‘providing’ the access, making that access a reality is really the aggregate product of many people’s efforts and doings... (Brunson, 2011, p. 1).

This is a nice summation of what VRS interpreting is about and how that impacts teaming.

In this literature review, the broad picture of potential interpreting strategies used within VRS work is studied. The scope of research related to teaming practices in VRS is

very narrow. Little to no research about current teaming practices within VRS exists. Looking into other focus areas related to the subject of teaming in VRS can give some examples that might impact the teaming situation. For the purpose of this study, I examined three areas related to my research question to give a broader picture of what Video Relay Service is like, why teaming might be a viable control option, as well as what teaming looks like in that specific setting. These three subtopics are important because they provide an explanation of the factors that need to be considered when looking at teaming in VRS, specifically. Given that VRS can be a higher stress environment to work in, understanding the foundations of the work and the strategies for coping with the setting in general and also while teaming is of utmost importance. These three focus areas provide insight to what can happen while interpreting in VRS. Because of the unique challenges that VIs experience within the VRS setting, having a stronger foundation of dealing with those challenges strategically as well as having a basic knowledge of general VRS practices will assist in the overall understanding of teaming within VRS.

The three areas are:

- strategies and multitasking while simultaneously interpreting
- handling stressors that arise in an interpreted setting
- general VRS practices.

## **Strategies and Multitasking While Simultaneously Interpreting**

The first component of interpreting in VRS is the actual interpreting work itself. Authors, Kohn and Kalina, (1996) explore the strategies that interpreters use while simultaneously interpreting. Simultaneous interpreting is one method VIs can use while interpreting in VRS that require listening, processing, and rendering of an interpretation at the same time. The authors look at the history of interpreting and the variety of models that the field has encountered over the years. It also identifies and explains communication without a third party (i.e., the interpreter) in the middle of the communication. Further, the authors look at the strategies for simultaneous interpreting, and how an interpreter can use those strategies in his/her work. By using the strategies, a team of interpreters is better able to decode the message of the deaf and hearing persons. Kohn and Kalina (1996) address the aspects of simultaneous interpreting that allow the interpreter to do his/her job effectively and explain, "Discourse processing is of a strategic nature in that it is intentional and goal oriented" (p. 122). Keeping the goal in mind is of the utmost importance while interpreting. Implementing the various strategies of simultaneous interpreting can help an interpreter cope with the information. Especially within VRS, an interpreter or interpreters need to have all the options that are viable and allow the interpreter to make the best choices in their work at any given moment. Utilizing a team within VRS allows a greater opportunity for a clear message. The goal is to have a successful outcome by having two interpreters working instead of just one.

In looking further into strategies regarding simultaneous interpreting and how it applies to VRS, an article was found that discusses how to handle complex syntax structure and extreme delivery speed. Often, the ability to understand the hearing person

when he or she talks on the phone is stifled. For example, some conference calls entail a lot of turn-taking, heavy accents, fast-paced speech, and many, many acronyms/jargon that are familiar to the people on the phone, but unfamiliar to the Video Interpreter. Again, managing all of the tasks at the same time within the VRS setting can be very difficult. Meuleman and Van Besien (2009) composed a study based on extreme speech conditions and analyzed how interpreters responded to those types of situations. If an interpreter cannot clearly understand the speaker and what is being said, then it is almost impossible to produce a clear interpretation. Meuleman and Van Besien (2009) looked at ways to help the cognitive load of the interpreter and ways to interpret the message more effectively. An analysis was performed wherein each of the 16 professional interpreters handled the information that was given at a fast pace and also with complex syntax structure. The strategies that Meuleman and Van Besien (2009) suggest in their article, such as omission and chunking, are strategies that can assist interpreters when faced with challenging situations. By utilizing these strategies, the Video Interpreter (VI) is better able to handle the information, therefore making the interpretation smoother and less problematic. Whether the VI is working alone or with another VI, implementing effective interpreting methods could lessen the stressors that may potentially arise during the call.

Researcher, Seeber, of the University of Geneva looked at the current theories of simultaneous interpreting and what new models are derived from those theories. He states “Simultaneous interpreting is the process of cross-linguistic transfer of meaning in real time. From an information-processing perspective the notion of *real time* deserves particular attention” (Seeber, 2011, p. 185). Simultaneous interpreting tactics can be used in order to process the information more successfully such as waiting, stalling, chunking

and anticipating (Seeber, 2011). The challenge with these strategies in VRS is the amount of time the interpreter will have to use those tactics to aid in their interpretation. Since all four people on the phone (the on-camera interpreter, team interpreter, the deaf consumer and the hearing consumer) are not together in the same location, using the tactics Seeber discusses in simultaneous interpreting could be advantageous to the outcome of the interpretation.

In the VRS setting, multitasking is mandatory. Interpreters are operating technology to place a phone call, and often while that is happening the deaf person and the interpreter may engage in light conversation while the phone is ringing for the hearing person. When the call is answered, more buttons might need to be pushed. Once the interpreter and the deaf person are connected to the hearing person over the phone, other distractions may be happening to any of the four people involved with the conversation. Because all four people are in different locations during the call, the likelihood of multitasking increases (RID, 2007). A study was conducted by Pasquandrea (2011) with Italian doctors, Chinese patients and an interpreter looking at interpreter-mediated interactions and the amount of multimodality occurring during those interactions. Pasquandrea states “research has demonstrated that interpreter-mediated interaction is influenced by a complex interplay of social, cultural, and interactional factors, shaping and constraining the communicative actions of the participants” (Pasquandrea, 2011, p. 455). Because of the complex interactions among all of the participants regardless of the presence of an interpreter, adding an interpreter to the mix brings even more variables into play. For example, the interpreter may be relied upon for the communication to occur, which yields some of the interactional power to the interpreter. The purpose of this

study was to show that in “interpreter-mediated communication, the analysis needs to include not only its verbal level, but also its numerous and intertwined layers of multimodal communicative responses” (Pasquandrea, 2011, p. 457). This study is important because often as an interpreter, it is easy to forget about all the roles present within an interpreting situation. There are so many details and so much history to the “story” that is being interpreted that the interpreter usually does not have knowledge of past interactions or conversations in order to aid in the call. The ability to include all players, as well as involving them into part of the process as much as possible, allows for more clarity in the long run (Pasquandrea, 2011). This study shows that what is already happening between interpreters and those they are interacting with “complements existing contributions focused primarily on interpreters’ multimodal behavior and their roles in the management of participation, in the delivery of information, in their co-construction of understanding and misunderstanding, and so on (Pasquandrea, 2011). As a Video Interpreter and because of the nature of the work, there are many aspects that require multi-tasking and a variety of proficiencies.

### **Handling stressors that arise in an interpreted setting**

Other than ways to handle the simultaneous interpreting aspect of a VI’s work, interpreters in VRS must take care of themselves, personally and professionally. Interpreter researchers Dean & Pollard (2001) examined what can happen to interpreters under stress and how learning to control stressors can benefit the interpreter and his/her workload, especially in Video Relay Service work. Dean & Pollard (2001) looked at the demand-control theory that was developed by Karasek (1979 as cited by Dean & Pollard, 2001). This theory explains how the requirements of the job, or the *demands*, sometimes



outweigh the *controls* of the job, or the way an employee can act upon those demands. By knowing the boundaries and limits of *demands* and *controls*, an interpreter is better able to make decisions that will enhance the working environment. Ignoring the demands that one might face in a job makes burnout more likely to occur (Dean & Pollard, 2001).

Interpreting in the VRS setting can be very stressful. If a Video Interpreter is not implementing self-care and keeping the demands of the job in check by utilizing a team to process calls, then a VI will not want to continue working in Video Relay Service.

Oldfield (2009) addresses the stressors within Video Relay Service in her doctoral dissertation by stating that “The VRS environment is a complex mix of regulated interactions with highly subjective content in every call” (Oldfield, 2009, p. 30) Each call is different, and the taxing part is that there is most likely not a “one size fits all” strategy for teaming practices. Each interpreter has different needs from his/her team, and each call has different needs as well, so is it possible that current teaming practices within VRS even exist? How do the different styles of teaming play a role in the VRS sector?

Interpreters need to be aware of the possibility of vicarious trauma while interpreting in VRS. Because of the variety of calls that come in and the wide range of topics, for example, 911 calls and other medical situations, interpreters can become emotionally involved in a call and may find it difficult to separate themselves from it. “Emotional stress may be caused by mental fatigue from vicarious trauma that is caused by interpreting content that can be emotionally challenging, as well as the pressure to keep up with the message” (Zenizo, 2013, p. 3). Keeping the emotionally challenging aspects of the job in check will help to lessen the likelihood of burnout and on-going emotional stress is important.

The Video Interpreter must juggle many aspects of the job all at the same time, from managing the technical aspects of the workstation, to interpreting a variety of phone calls from regions all over the United States between hearing and Deaf callers. A VI must have a wide range of interpreting skills as well as customer service skills while working in VRS. These could include cultural mediation, telephone etiquette, and excellent American Sign Language to English and English to American Sign Language skills. These are just a few of the qualities a VI must possess. (Brunson, 2011). Maintaining RID certification and attaining Continuing Education Units (CEUs) in a variety of subject is highly encouraged to stay current with best practices within the field (RID, 2007). Without all of the appropriate skills, the complexity of the message could become overwhelming. Many issues can arise while interpreting in Video Relay Service. If many deaf consumers are not satisfied with the Video Interpreter's ability to interpret the message time after time, then the VI could potentially lose his/her job. Since Video Relay Service is fairly new to the field of signed language interpretation, not much research has been done on strategies within VRS, or on ways to train interpreters for VRS work prior to employment and the like (Oldfield, 2009). There are many aspects of VRS that are not taught within Interpreter Training Programs (ITPs) because most recent graduates of programs do not enter the VRS setting until they first have years of experience under their belts, and then have certification from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) and the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). RID and NAD are professional organizations in the field of signed language interpreting, and they provide a comprehensive exam to assess the skills and ethics of interpreters. If an interpreter passes the exam, the interpreter becomes certified. Another reason VRS is usually not for recent

graduates of ITPs is due to their lack of experience in “real world” interpreting (Oldfield, 2009). A last reason is because training has not been provided by ITPs, and Interpreter Educators most likely do not have a curriculum on which to base VRS training as of yet (Oldfield, 2009). By looking at the various strategies that can be used in VRS, one may have a better understanding of the kinds of skills an interpreter or team of interpreters must have within VRS. World experience and knowledge is key to a VI and being able to use schema as an interpreting skill.

RID’s stance on gathering information prior to the beginning of a call is made clear in their Standard Practice Paper about VRS interpreting. They say:

Industry standards and best practices suggest that interpreters are most successful when they are able to obtain information about the subject of an interpreted conversation in advance because interpreters exercise professional judgment and make decisions based, in part, on this information. While the FCC does not prohibit the gathering of such information by a VRS interpreter prior to placing a call, this is not a common policy among VRS providers. RID supports the practice of interpreters obtaining necessary information in order to process calls appropriately. (RID, 2007)

Most of the time, the VI has no idea what the call content will entail or how long the conversation will last, therefore ensuring the message is clear can be extra stressful. Another stressful aspect of VRS interpreting is the wide variety of calls. They range from family conversations, to medical advice, to conference calls, to ordering food for lunch and everything in between. The phone calls also come from all regions of the United

States and even sometimes Puerto Rico and Guam, so there are often regional signs that the VI may not know, or context related to the call with which the VI is unfamiliar. Having a background in a variety of sign choices, regional dialects and general world knowledge is key to success in any VRS setting. When working in VRS, an interpreter must have an open mind and welcoming spirit to any kind of phone call that may occur. Because of the complex and dynamic nature of VRS work, it is imperative that a VI receives current training on the technology used, as well as interpreting skill (RID, 2007).

Video Interpreters work together on a day to day basis. The same VIs do not always work together every day, but within a specific company the group of Video Interpreters makes up the interpreting team as a whole. Wood (2008) shares a definition of what working in a team or a group means, no matter what the primary focus of the work is. She states,

For all types of groups, communication is a primary influence on productivity and the climate of interaction....For example, constructive group communication requires that members use effective verbal and nonverbal communication, check perceptions with one another, listen mindfully, build good climates, and adapt communication to each other and various group goals and situations. (Wood, 2008, p. 236)

### **General VRS practices**

Understanding the general practices within VRS can provide a solid foundation that interpreters can rely on when interpreting in such a specific setting. Video Relay Services are regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC is responsible for setting standards that VRS companies and their interpreters must follow

when handling calls. These regulations help to ensure that VRS calls are handled efficiently, appropriately and ethically (RID, 2007). The basic requirements for using VRS are a monitor, a video camera device and a broadband (high-speed) Internet connection (RID, 2007). Since VRS is bound by the FCC, one of the regulations is keeping all call-related material confidential ([www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov)). Professional signed language interpreters also have another set of professional guidelines to follow. RID/NAD has created the RID Code of Professional Conduct (CPC). The CPC is a set of professional tenets to which interpreters are expected to adhere while working in the field of signed language interpretation. The seven tenets of the Code of Professional Conduct are listed below and provide an outline of the ethical considerations that interpreters have to make on a day-to-day basis.

### **Tenets of the Code of Professional Conduct (CPC)**

1. Interpreters adhere to standards of confidential communication.
2. Interpreters possess the professional skills and knowledge required for the specific interpreting situation.
3. Interpreters conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the specific interpreting situation.
4. Interpreters demonstrate respect for consumers.
5. Interpreters demonstrate respect for colleagues, interns, and students of the profession.
6. Interpreters maintain ethical business practices.
7. Interpreters engage in professional development.

*Source: [www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org), retrieved May 22, 2013.*

Interpreters who work in VRS are sometimes required, depending on the specific company, to have RID/NAD certification. Obtaining and maintaining certification

demonstrates that the interpreter is upholding both professionalism and ethical standards to a high level.

When an interpreter decides to go into VRS, extensive training on how to navigate the technology for processing calls is required prior to employment. Once an interpreter is trained in VRS, the skill of interpreting a wide array of calls from deaf people in different states while operating the technical parts of the job can be challenging, especially at first. It takes extensive training and real world experience before an interpreter can or is ready to work in the VRS setting (Oldfield, 2009). It takes years of experience and training before the time is right for an interpreter to enter the VRS setting. Often an interpreter who goes into VRS has been working in the community or educational settings prior to VRS. Working within a 3-D medium rather than a 2-D medium can limit the ability to comprehend the meaning of the information (Brunson, 2001). Those who enter VRS need to have a “unique grasp on ASL and understand the process of interpreting and VRS” (Brunson, 2011).

Another aspect of teaming in VRS that was found in the literature was that RID supports the use of a Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI) while teaming in VRS as a viable option to the teaming situation (RID, 2007). Perhaps that idea is something that needs to be investigated, depending on the philosophy of VRS companies, to see how that may enhance the teaming relationships among the VIs. Brunson mentions the use of a CDI in the VRS sector in his book, *Video Relay Services Interpreting*. By having a trained deaf interpreter available to assist in calls where it is more of a challenge to understand the deaf caller, it would be beneficial for the call. This is one option for a teaming practice that came to mind when reviewing the literature about teaming in VRS. Having a native

user of the language assist in the call could be a strong support for the on-camera VI. RID supports the use of a team whenever deemed necessary by the VI (RID, 2007).

Overall, this literature provides a better understanding of how an interpreter can handle the VRS setting in a more productive way, whether working individually or with a team. By using the mechanisms in simultaneous interpreting, as well as managing the stress level that can happen in VRS interpreting, a VI is able to be more successful in his/her career in VRS. If an interpreter does not keep these methods in the forefront of his or her mind, then the quality of the interpreting work could diminish over time. If interpreters use the mechanisms for good decision making and have a team person available for support, then the call has more opportunity for success.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Purpose/Research Focus**

The purpose of this study is to identify the current teaming practices within Video Relay Service and by doing so, begin to establish standard practices in the industry. Identifying the current teaming practices can alleviate some of the stressful dynamics of having a team during a VRS call. The goal of this research about teaming in VRS is to look at teaming practices between the VIs who are working together, to see if the outcome of the call can be successful and as stress-free as possible for everyone involved—the VI, hearing consumer, deaf consumer and the second VI. The goal is that everyone would be on the same page and have the same goals in mind to make the call successful. Given the potential complexity of communication between a Deaf person, hearing person and an interpreter, adding another interpreter to that mix can be overwhelming. The ultimate goal is to see if VIs who work together can get on the same page when it comes to what is needed in a teaming situation during a call.

### **Research Site**

For this study, I observed and asked interview questions (see Appendix A) of VIs at a Video Relay Service call center in the Pacific Northwest. Prior to observing and interviewing, I applied to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and awaited approval to work with human subjects within my study. After an extensive application of what the student would include and approval from the IRB, I was able to begin my research. The setting for the observations was an office-type building with workstations where interpreters process calls between hearing and Deaf people using high-speed Internet to connect via a videophone or webcam. The workstations are semi-private areas, so only



the Deaf caller can see the VI who answered their phone call. There is a general office area next to the workstations where other VIs take their breaks, monitor central computer, and sometimes engage in side conversations. It is understood that all information and communication that happens at the call center is strictly confidential, since VRS falls under FCC regulations ([www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov)). The goal is that VIs follow the RID Code of Professional Conduct and also the general VRS company policies. Appropriate measures must be taken by relay providers to ensure that confidentiality of VRS users is maintained ([www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov)). That reality is often misleading because often, but not always, when a team interpreter comes over to help with the call, the deaf person cannot see the team interpreter and essentially has no idea that a fourth person is there. Therefore, to some degree, confidentiality is being broken even though all VIs fall under the same standards of confidentiality and professionalism.

### **Participants**

To conduct the observations, I went to the VRS call center and obtained consent from the VIs working that particular shift, to be observed while teaming calls. I observed ten VIs all together—four during a weekday evening shift and six during a weekend day shift. Upon completion of the observations and about one week later, I asked three VIs if they would like to be interviewed regarding current teaming practices in VRS. The VIs who were interviewed had a variety of educational levels and years of experience, ranging from three years to thirteen years of general interpreting. The range of experience in the VRS setting was from two years to seven years. All three VIs have current RID Certification. Two of the VIs interviewed are part-time VRS employees, and one is a full-time Video Interpreter. Out of the ten interpreters I observed at the VRS call center, two

of those VIs were part of the interview process. The interpreters interviewed will remain anonymous because they signed a consent form (see Appendices B and C) to participate in the study. For the purpose of this research, the three VIs will be named gender neutral names--Charlie, Shawn, and Terri. In this paper for consistency purposes, I will be using the pronouns, *she* and *her*, when referring to any participant within the study, regardless whether the person is male or female.

### **Research Design**

Upon completion of the interviews, I transcribed the audio recorded interviews of what the interviewees said, verbatim. I started with open coding of the data. Open coding is “the part of the analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). Then I moved to exclusionary coding for a more detailed look to see what patterns or themes arose within the information from the participants. I chose this method because I wanted to get a broad picture of what was going on in terms of teaming in the particular call center I observed, and then narrowed down what I saw into patterns of practices that are currently happening based on the interviews. Since this topic has very little research, getting an overall picture of the basics with regard to teaming is a way to lay the foundation of this beginning research. By starting out on a small scale with observing and interviewing a handful of VIs working in VRS, I was able to first establish if there are current teaming practices happening or not. If the conclusion – that yes there are current teaming practices occurring – then future research can be done.

The interviews provided concrete examples of what happens while teaming – those that are deemed effective as well as ineffective by the interviewee’s viewpoints.

Since this is just the tip of the iceberg of this topic of study, it is understood that observing only a few shifts at the call center was not enough to encapsulate all of the possible teaming practices, but this is a beginning to show what is happening currently within VRS.

### **Observation Methods**

I went to a VRS call center and observed VIs working during two different shifts, an evening four-hour shift during the week and a weekend eight-hour shift during the day. I observed a total of eleven VIs between both shifts. Upon arrival, I engaged in small talk with the VIs who were working before I delved into the observations. Since I was acting in a different capacity than normal, I wanted to make sure rapport was established before I started in with the observations. I then explained my research and asked the working VIs if they would consent to being observed. All of the VIs working consented to me observing the teaming interaction that happened during a call. I took extensive and detailed notes of what I observed and identified while teaming situations occurred. I made sure not to encroach on their space too much with the teaming process and I was able to get an in-depth view of what happened between the team of VIs working together.

### **Interview methods**

The interviews I conducted happened at three different times with three different VIs. I posed six questions to each participant, although I did ask follow up questions when more explanation was necessary (see Appendix A). Each interview lasted 45 minutes to an hour. The interviews were held in a confidential meeting place with no other distractions. I used an audio recording device to record the interviews on a password-protected computer. By recording the interviews, I was then able to go back

and transcribe the data from the interviews for my research study. Each Video Interpreter whom I interviewed shared personal experiences, insights, recommendations, background, policies and the like, relating to teaming practices and Video Relay Service interpreting. The interviews provided a detailed look at what is currently happening regarding teaming and VRS at this particular call center.

### **Methodological strengths**

By focusing on a particular call center for the observations and interviews, I was able to pay close attention to the details of what happens in teaming situations. If I were to have been at a large call center with multiple teaming instances occurring at the same time, it would have been more challenging to gather the information needed to complete the study. By using the small call center for my research, I was able to focus on specifics rather than choose between multiple teaming instances co-occurring. I recognize that these particular teaming instances mentioned, in both the interviews and the observations, cannot be applied to all VIs working in all VRS companies and to all of the call centers throughout the United States of America. The length of time I spent at the call center also allowed for ample teaming situations to occur, therefore adding more richness to my data collection.

The selection of participants chosen for the interviews created a pool of interviewees that possessed an extensive background of professional interpreting experience and life experience, both of which are integral to the field of interpreting. So much of an interpreter's work is experientially based that having a strong foundation in those instances can aid the interpreter in the overall process of interpreting in VRS (Oldfield, 2009). The interviewees had at least two years' experience working in the VRS

setting. Two of the interviewees currently work part time in VRS and one of the interviewees currently works full time in VRS.

### **Methodological limitations**

While it is known that limitations will occur within any study, the main limitation of this study is that its small scale limits the ability to generalize the findings and apply them to other VRS call centers in the United States. This is just the beginning of exploring team interpreting in VRS. Likewise, every VRS company is different and has its own policies and procedures regarding teaming and the encouragement or discouragement of teaming while working. At the same time, each call center has its own quirks and characteristics of how it is run, how the manager operates the floor, the experience of the VIs working there, among others, so it is not possible to get a complete picture of the current teaming practices industry-wide. This study is limited to one call center in the Pacific Northwest. The goal is that this research may start a discussion about what teaming practices in VRS potentially look like beyond this pilot study.

## FINDINGS

In this section, the findings of this study will be discussed. First, the observations will be explained and then the interviews will be explained.

### Observation Results

I observed Video Interpreters on two different days at a call center in the Pacific Northwest. I arrived at the call center and obtained consent from (see Appendix C) the VIs working during a weekday evening shift and a weekend day shift. There were five VIs working during the evening shift and six VIs working during the day shift. Once I obtained consent from everyone working, I took extensive and detailed field notes of what I observed. Figure 2 has the reasons that a team was called and the number of occurrences for each reason. These reasons were identified by what was observed during the time of the teaming instances and coded by the patterns observed when teaming occurred between the two VIs working.

<u>Reason #1:</u> VI needed extra support and/or reassurance during call	<u>Reason #2:</u> VI could not understand the deaf or hearing person on the call	<u>Reason #3:</u> Technology hindrances occurred	<u>Reason #4:</u> Call did not occur because answering machine picked up	<u>Reason #5:</u> Logistical reason for needing a team	<u>Total Teaming Situations</u>
6	3	2	2	1	14

Figure 2. Reasons a Team Was Called

In Figure 3 (see below), a graphic representation shows the reasons that a team was called and how often those reasons occurred. The total number of teaming situations I observed between the two days was fourteen. There were four teaming situations during the weekday evening shift and ten teaming situations during the weekend day shift. Out of the fourteen teaming occurrences, six times a teaming situation happened because the on-camera VI needed extra support and/or reassurance during the call (see Reason #1 above). Three times were because the on-camera VI could not understand the deaf or the hearing person on the call (see Reason #2 above). Technology hindrances occurred two times as a reason for needing a team (see Reason #3 above) as well as two times the teaming situation did not occur because the call rang several times and then an answering machine picked up (see Reason #4 above). One time a team was called because the on-camera VI needed to convey information that the call could potentially last a long time, and asked to have her lunch break at a later time (see Reason #5 above). A majority of the calls during both shifts were not teamed. In the cases with the calls that had a team, most seemed successful with the help of a second VI working on the call. I noticed a difference between the weekday shift and the weekend shift in terms of teaming styles and reasons for asking for a team. The weekday shift had more business type calls as well as calls that did not go through. The weekend shift had more personal type phone calls.

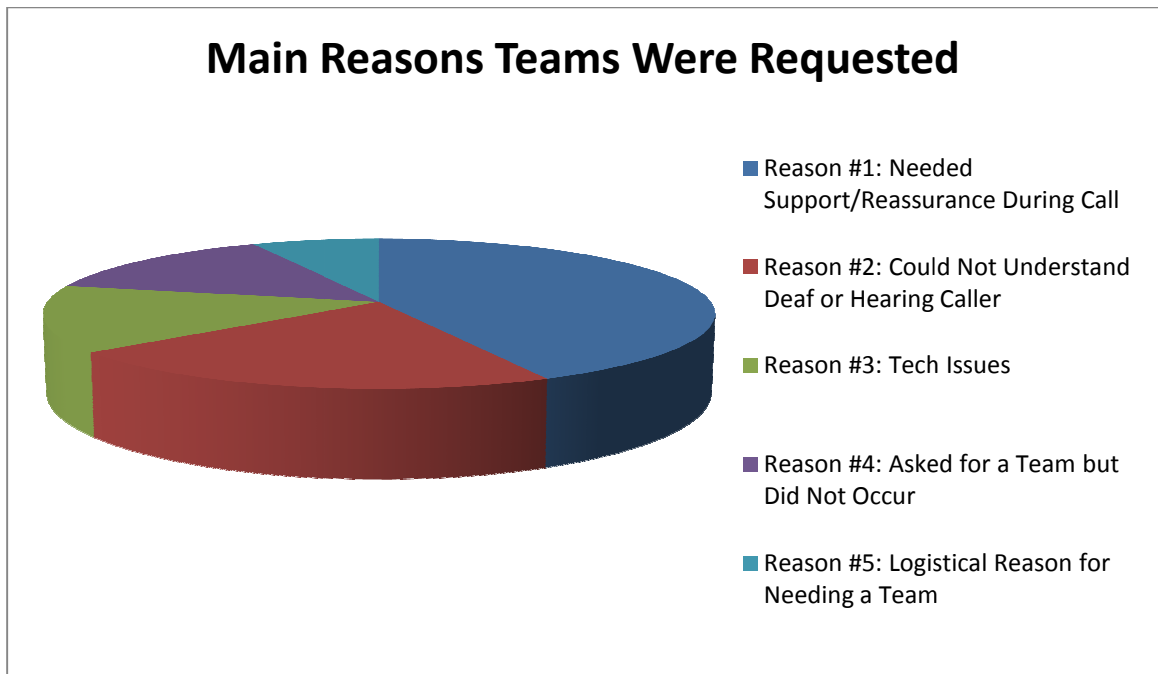


Figure 3. Main Reasons Teams Were Requested

This chart above gives a more graphic representation of the reasons why interpreters call for a team. During the observations, several teaming situations between VIs that showed many of the practices that are common in the VRS setting occurred. Based on my observations, some of the teaming interactions were successful, while some were not, due to logistical reasons of the call not going through (i.e. answering machine picked up). In the instances where teaming occurred, the situations seemed successful given that two VI's worked together to complete the call and based on my perception.

When a VI is working in a station, if the need for a team arises then the VI who is monitoring the floor gets a signal from the working VI to come over and help out. Once the “monitor” VI arrives at the station there could be a variety of reasons they were asked to come and team. The information that is exchanged between the working VI and the team is very discrete and unobtrusive to the call. The team interpreter usually speaks



English softly so the hearing person on the phone will not hear the team interpreter feeding information to the on-camera VI. During the observations, a variety of reasons a team is called over to help arose, such as:

- poor technological quality of the video or audio display
- hearing person is hard to understand
- deaf person is hard to understand
- topic/jargon is highly complex and hard to understand
- something is “missing” from the interpretation and the VI cannot figure out what is missing
- VI wants to have “another set of eyes” on the call in case something turns ugly
- conference calls
- 911 calls
- international calls
- and many more reasons

From my observations, when a team is called over to help, the team interpreter usually plugs in their headset cord to the on-camera VI’s cord in order to hear the hearing person talking and assist in the call. Some of the time, VIs would just walk up to see what the teaming situation was going to be like before, or if at all, plugging in their headset. During the observations, when an on-camera VI was interpreting the call and realized he/she needed help from one of their fellow Video Interpreters, (i.e., the *team interpreter*), they inconspicuously signaled the VI who was not currently sitting in a station, but was instead managing the entire floor of on-camera VIs. The monitoring VI

gave her attention to the VIs who were working in calls to make sure they have support when needed. When an on-camera VI needs the assistance of another VI, they signal for the monitor VI to come over to their station to help with the call. The VI who was supporting the floor of all the VIs working now becomes the team interpreter with the on-camera interpreter that just requested help. The team VI has a headset as well and plugs their headset into the on-camera VI's headset so they are both able to hear the hearing person on the call. Some of the team interpreters brought a chair to sit in and team with the on-camera VI and others just stood close to the station. Based on my past experience, as well as through data collection, many times information is given relating to the call, it is done so in a way that the deaf person has no idea that there is a second interpreter present, unless it is a conference call. Most of the time the VIs would talk without moving their mouth with the phone on mute or sign below the webcam so the deaf person cannot see what they are doing. The negotiating that happened was quick and to the point and most of the time it happened in a mix of ASL and English. The team interpreter would speak in English to the on-camera VI because most of the time the team interpreter's microphone is pointed up so the hearing person is less likely to hear the team interpreter "feeding" the on-camera VI. Mainly, the only time the deaf person really knows there is a second interpreter working is during a conference call. I did not see any conference calls occur during the times of observation.

One instance I observed was when an on-camera interpreter was not understanding the fingerspelling of the deaf caller and the VI asked for team to come assist in deciphering what the deaf caller was fingerspelling. The team interpreter spelled out in English the name being fingerspelled. The on-camera interpreter did not

understand the deaf person and was confused as to whom they were calling since they were not signing clearly. At first, the feeds for the team interpreter were given in gloss English form to help make it simpler for the VI to translate the message for the deaf person to understand. There was obviously a breakdown of language/communication of understanding in regard to what the interpreter was signing. The feeds were then given in this instance in ASL above the computer monitor to show another way of interpreting for the deaf person who had Minimal Language Skills (MLS), according to the two VIs working on the call together. The call resulted in the on-camera Video Interpreter transferring the call to customer service since the on-camera interpreter figured out the deaf person was trying to call another deaf person and accidentally called an interpreter through VRS.

Another teaming situation that I noticed occurring multiple times was that the on-camera VIs communicating with their teams talked like a “ventriloquist,” or talking without moving their mouth, and signing to the team interpreter with their hands in their lap so the deaf caller would not see their communication and/or negotiating. Some talking with the team interpreter occurred before the team interpreter arrived to assist in the call and then the team interpreter informed the on-camera interpreter that she had seen this deaf caller before. The team interpreter gave many head nods to the on-camera interpreter in terms of reassurance/support, more feeds in English and confirmations were given to the on-camera interpreter. After the call, some debriefing about the deaf caller and his history with using interpreters and the sign choices he uses were shared between the two VIs.

Another situation I observed was the deaf caller who asked for a female interpreter, even though a male interpreter answered the call. Once a female interpreter was able to switch with the male interpreter, the on-camera interpreter told the team that she wanted to make sure “I am ‘on’ this, ok?” The team interpreter, which was the original on-camera interpreter, watched the deaf caller and the “new” on-camera interpreter asked if she was on the right track using ASL and the team interpreter responded in English with confirmation. Also the team interpreters gave feeds in English as well to the on-camera interpreter depending on what it was that she needed. Some of the feeds were in ASL, depending on the context at that given time. The team interpreter moved closer to the working interpreter and I noticed more affirmations to the on-camera interpreter from the team interpreter. There were lots of head nods by teaming interpreter for reassurance. At one point, the on-camera interpreter put the phone on mute and cued in the team interpreter using English with “so hard cuz [*sic*] I don’t know what it looks like! Shit! [*sic*]” The team interpreter responded with “You got it!” As the call continued, there was more clarification needed by the on-camera interpreter to team interpreter by signing “QUESTION” below the webcam (without the deaf caller seeing it) to the team VI. The team interpreter kept responding with confirmations to the on-camera interpreter. After the call, they debriefed about several things, including the context, sign choices, jargon used by the deaf caller, positive feedback/affirmations, and how to support. The discussion wrapped up the experience of the two VIs teaming together.

Another situation that was somewhat similar to the one just explained was an on-camera interpreter asking for clarification of the team interpreter by signing “QUESTION” so the deaf person could not see them doing so. The team interpreter gave

the feed in English to the on-camera interpreter. The on-camera interpreter kept signing “QUESTION” to make sure they were on track with the call.

The next situation I observed was an on-camera VI talking between her teeth while looking down to inform her team interpreter of what was going on in the call. The on-camera interpreter was confused about the signs being used by the deaf caller and needed support because of the context. There was also a technical issue in that the screen was blurry, which made it more difficult to understand what the deaf caller was signing. The on-camera interpreter kept talking between her teeth to the team interpreter to make sure the message was clear.

Some questions occurred to me while I was observing: what happens if there is no support person available because they are assisting in another call already? From my observations there is only one monitor interpreter available for any given time. The VIs rotate so everyone has a turn to be the monitor interpreter for at least 30 minutes to an hour during their shift. If the monitor VI is teaming with a VI and then a second VI calls for a team, what happens then? A similar experience happened during one of my observations. A VI asked for a team to come and assist in the call and nobody else was available because there was no monitor interpreter available at all, so I went over to team. I know I did not have to do that, but ethically I felt compelled to do so as a previous VRS interpreter; I am not going to leave a VI alone and let her struggle through the call even though I technically was not working at that time since I was there for purposes of research. My decision might have not been the “correct” decision as a researcher, but in that moment I paused my research and switched gears to help out a fellow interpreter.

There seemed to be a few times when a team would be called over to help and assistance could not be provided because of unknown information. When there are technical issues, then sometimes the call is unsuccessful just because of the nature of technology. For example, I saw a couple of times when an on-camera interpreter asked for a team to help with the technical issues because of a bad audio connection. Neither the on-camera interpreter, nor the team interpreter could decipher what was being said. A similar situation happened when the on-camera VI called a team interpreter to come over and assist in the call. There was no audio information being heard, so assistance was needed. I noticed the teaming VI sat close enough to the working VI to see the deaf person and be able to hear the on-camera interpreter's voice because the on-camera VI spoke under her breath to relay information about the client on the phone and to get more support from the team interpreter. I noticed the negotiating needs of a team during a call can be tricky due to confidentiality purposes.

An odd situation happened when the on-camera VI was trying to leave a message from a hearing caller to a deaf person. The message was complete gibberish and did not make any sense at all, according to the VI. The VI needed support to make sure there was some sort of understanding since there is no context whatsoever provided by the hearing caller. When the team interpreter came over to help not much could be given in terms of a feed because both interpreters could not understand what the hearing person's message said.

### **Interview Results**

The interviews were coded using an open coding system and then an exclusionary coding system (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). I noticed patterns as well as outliers throughout

the transcriptions that seemed important to my research question (see Appendix A). The goal in conducting interviews was to see what themes arose between the interviewees and their experience in the field of VRS interpreting and teaming as well as compared to their experience in the world of community interpreting and teaming. I was also coding for patterns that arose within the interviews of ways that teaming currently occurs. There were many similarities in the answers and many differences as well. I did not ask specifically about policies of VRS companies, but in most of the interviews the participants mentioned how the company policies can have an effect on teaming practices with VRS, as well as certain call centers. The main codes that arose were:

- Satisfaction of Current Teaming Practices in VRS
- Reasons for Using a Team
- Ways of Teaming in VRS: Pre-call, During a call, Post-call
- Standard Practice Ideas

### **Satisfaction of Current Teaming Practices in VRS**

Generally speaking, the interpreters interviewed are not satisfied with the current teaming practices. The disconnect of information between the interpreter working on the call and the interpreter coming to team is too great sometimes, therefore making it challenging when the team interpreter arrives to the station. Shawn said in the interview, “I’m not satisfied with the current teaming practices because there’s not enough discussion being done ahead of time. I think that there could be more.” Charlie stated that, “When we are teaming in VRS nobody knows the team is there and it’s all very

hush-hush. And you're trying not to give away that you have a team there so I'm not sure how I feel about that."

Another issue that arose throughout the interviews was how the various VRS companies view teaming and whether it is encouraged or discouraged. Charlie stated:

I would say in general I am not satisfied because <um> a lot of companies seem to discourage teaming because they are more concerned about paying as few people as possible so they are making the most profit and if you have two people on one call that's obviously not as profitable as one person on one call, so <um> I think a lot of companies don't outright discourage teaming but it becomes an environment where it's discouraged and not used ever, but even companies that encourage it more I feel like also <um> they don't really provide training for VRS teaming, I don't think.

Likewise, Shawn stated, "VRS company policies are in place that create hesitation to call for a team at certain places." Shawn elaborated by saying that depending on where a VI works, there can be a variance in terms of how much teaming is supported. Shawn continues with how the practice of teaming could be approached when a new interpreter gets hired by a VRS company. Shawn shares:

It could be like almost part of a new interpreter when they come into the center like part of their orientation, maybe, that they would outline how they like to be teamed and that would be prep material essentially for everybody else in the center and it could be stored somewhere, ya know [*sic*]. It would have to be a working document because over time and as you mature as an interpreter, I think



you need different things. To have something, some idea before heading in would be helpful.

Terri mentioned in her interview that it does not seem like there is anything set and how it is more like you are “flying by the seat of your pants.” She reiterated just as Charlie did how the deaf caller never knows that a team is there. Terri continued to say that, “I guess I’m sort of satisfied cuz [*sic*] we’re kind of developing it [teaming] now or trying to figure it [teaming] out now so for what it is now, it’s not awful.”

Based on these responses, it seems like most of the interviewees wish there were more being done about teaming practices.

### **Reasons for Using a Team**

The reasons for calling a team to assist in a call can be many. Shawn, Charlie and Terri all spoke of the same main reason for calling a team: technology issues/hindrance.

Other reasons that were noted during the interviews for calling a team were:

- cannot see or hear the person
- not understanding deaf or hearing person
- complex content
- legal call
- conference call
- gut intuition
- 911 calls
- job interviews
- upset Deaf called
- refusal to accept VRS call

- emotional support
- and last but not least and stated by all three interviewees is “needing another set of eyes” and/or “missing something.”

The commonality of needing a “second set of eyes/opinion” explains that having a second person there provides support and extra help no matter what kind of help that is. However, what happens when that “help” is not helpful? I had follow-up questions in all three interviews about working with particular teams or just making do and not calling a team based on who is working. Shawn shared “Yeah, there are times when the call will be made worse depending on who it is that comes over. I think, at least, that I can do a more efficient job on my own than with having somebody else there, depending on that person.” Without being able to communicate in advance what the situation is and what is needed, it can be difficult to work with certain people in a call because of the lack of knowledge and support that is needed. Charlie comments about a situation similar to Shawn’s:

It was kind of hard because the person teaming with me was giving me so much. I needed them to back off. I think that happens a lot where just cuz [*sic*] I called you over doesn’t mean I need you to feed me every sign the deaf person is signing. I understand mostly what’s going on and I need a little lag time to make it the whole picture and make it a clear sentence that sounds coherent. And sometimes I find that teams are shooting words at me the whole time and I have to, and that’s something else I’ll do, I say ‘wait a minute, I got it,’ ya know [*sic*], like give me a second because I’m going along voicing and they’re giving me the

English words while I'm processing... and I don't need any of that...<um> so yeah, sometimes that's a little frustrating and there are certain people who tend to do that more than others.

What all three interviewees stated as another theme throughout the interviews is the fact that the hardest part is not knowing what the on-camera VI needs. Terri states that, "The hardest thing is figuring out like, if I'm the one that is coming to team, what this person now needs? To me that's the biggest question when I walk up there because I haven't been privy to any information prior to getting there." What I gathered from all three participants is that there tends to be a lot of educated guessing when it comes to figuring out the needs of the on-camera VI and how to best help him/her out. All three VIs mentioned the words "missing something" or "I want another set of eyes." That was a very common theme in the responses. Also, something else that was an undertone was how each call is different and so it is hard to really have teaming practices in VRS since you never can "prep" for what is about to come.

### **Ways of Teaming in VRS**

When teaming in VRS, there are times when teaming occurs or does not occur before the call starts, during the call and after the call is over. The following sub-sections outline the examples that the interviewee's stated about ways that teaming occurs in the Video Relay Service setting.

#### **Pre-call**

Teaming in VRS can be tricky and not always a smooth process. The interviewees mentioned a variety of ways that teaming occurs before arriving to help the on-camera interpreter, during the actual call and post call. Because of the nature of VRS and how it

is ruled by the FCC to be private, often the Deaf consumer does not even know that there is a second interpreter present. Terri explains further during her interview:

I think the biggest thing I put down on here that I think it's really difficult to really do, like, good teaming because the problem is that most of the time the deaf person and the hearing person don't know there is a second interpreter there. Where in the real world they will obviously see that there is, but that's part of what makes teaming really difficult is trying to be like hiding the other interpreter being there. Most of the time conference calls, deaf folks are pretty savvy with there being another person there, but not necessarily the hearing person on a conference call.

The interviewees mentioned how in the VRS/2-D world, you cannot negotiate before the job starts like an interpreter can in the "real"/3-D world of interpreting. Charlie mentioned how when an interpreter is teaming a non-VRS job you are able to discuss what teaming is going to look like before you start working. She says:

... you don't have any opportunities to discuss how you want to team together or what things might come up or will be challenging that you want to support each other on like you do in a freelance job, out in the world job. So, you don't really have an opportunity to talk about things ahead of time and set up any kind of expectations of one another.

### **During a call**

Other ways that teams communicate relate to how the "feeds" or exchange of information takes place. Most of the time the team interpreter is using English to tell the working interpreter what they are missing, when it is asked for. That approach is different

than interpreting practices in the real world, most of the time. Here is an example of that situation that Shawn shared:

I would say one of the major differences is how you receive the feeds or the support you are looking for. I've done it and I think most interpreters do in the real world/3-D world is English to ASL. The work itself is classroom, conferences and the majority of the time the person doing most of the speaking is the hearing person <um> and if you have a team in that situation the feed comes in ASL.

Whereas, in the VRS world, it's rare that I get a feed in ASL. Normally it's somebody speaking to you. And so even when they are feeding you a sign, you know, the deaf person is just not understanding you for whatever reason, your sign choice, even if your team is feeding you a different choice, it's usually being verbally described: "sign this, instead of this" as opposed to just signing it to me because I can't turn over and look at the person next to me to see their thought on it and so that's a major difference.

A way of teaming that Shawn, Charlie and Terri all talked about was the communicating like a "ventriloquist" and the "talk" to the team interpreter without the Deaf caller knowing. Because of the nature of VRS and the fact that Deaf people are not supposed to know that a second interpreter is there, frequently the on-camera interpreter will try to talk without moving his or her mouth so the Deaf person does not know a second interpreter is helping out. By using "fake talking" to share information with the team interpreter, the privacy of the interpreted call remains in place. Most of the time, it is only disclosed that there are two interpreters working when they are interpreting a conference call together that will last an hour or more. For those cases, two interpreters

switch every 15-20 minutes, to prevent fatigue and deterioration of the message, as well as providing the opportunity to share information about the call with each other and support each other. VRS interpreting and conference calls seem to be their own ball game when it comes to teaming. Conference calls are usually put on by a business or company to be able to have multiple people on the call, majority of them hearing, at the same time. Often, conference calls have a lot of jargon, acronyms, and other technical language that the people on the conference call are familiar with, but it can be more challenging for the VIs, who are not familiar with the content. Conference calls last from 30 minutes up to three hours. The length of the call and the type of call that it is determine if the use of a team will be necessary or not.

Terri gives an explanation for what she does to communicate while in a call, “I hit mute and say ‘I don’t understand this hearing person or I don’t understand this Deaf person,’ short key phrases because you’re still in the midst of interpreting the call.” That way the team interpreter can clue in on what the on-camera interpreter needs in terms of support during the call. Otherwise, it is usually a guessing game as to how the support should be provided. Terri gives another example of how she teams during a call by signing below the camera since the deaf person cannot usually see below the waist of the VI. She says,

A lot of times we’ll sign below the camera level really quick. We’ll either fingerspell something or like ‘What the fuck?’ or ‘Right?’ or ‘What’s going on’ or just quick little things. That’s how communication happens. It’s also reassuring to the on-camera VI to hear, ‘Yep, you’re doing a great job.’

### **Post-call**

Only one of the interviewees spoke of debriefing after a call. Her comment was how most VRS companies do not allow for time to debrief after the call because it costs the company money to allow that to happen. It is more profitable for two VIs to be plugged in and working again, as opposed to sitting afterwards and chatting about what just happened during that teaming situation. Some companies will allow time for that, but it is not as long as it would be – or should be – after a community interpreting assignment. After jobs in the “real”/3-D world, interpreters could debrief for an hour or more about how the job went. In VRS that usually does not happen unless the company supports that debriefing.

### **Standard Practice Ideas**

The last question I asked was if the VI could come up with any standard practice for teaming, what would it be? It seemed to be a question that caused the participants to stop and think about what that would really look like. There were comments like, “... in a dream world” or, “...in a perfect world, such and such would happen.” I wanted to see if there were any thoughts or ideas about what a teaming standard in VRS would look like.

Shawn hesitated to say that there should be a standard based on a past experience she had. She explained a “standard” that was implemented at a certain VRS company to help with teaming and how even the slight attempt at that caused more problems than good. There are too many factors when it comes to teaming and it is hard to just pick one stand-alone reason that a team is needed. She thinks it would be good to have a way to

communicate with people ahead of time, sharing how you like to team and what she would be looking for in a team. Shawn commented:

I think if each person had her own little section on a piece of paper that said this is what I'm looking for in a team for the majority of the time, because obviously it's going to change. That would be nice, but as long as it's something that can be changed or altered and added to and things like that because I know for myself it's changed a lot over the years.

That is Shawn's idea for a standard practice for teaming in VRS. By knowing the basics of what each VI needs, the process could potentially be a smoother one.

Charlie shared her thoughts about a standard practice of teaming in VRS by saying that "teaming should be encouraged so much more in VRS." She explained how a colleague said teaming in the 2-D world is so different than the 3-D world and how in the community you are assigned a job by yourself, most of the time without a team and sometimes it is a hard job and you figure it out. A major difference in VRS is that there is:

... no context, you're not from the same geographical location, you don't get the opportunity to pick or choose your jobs so in the community I'm not going to be at a, I won't be interpreting a deposition ever cuz [*sic*] I won't take that job. But I was doing that the other day on the phone, ya know? It's the complexity and the content that are out of your control and <um> and ya know it does make a big difference, especially with the whole intimate register. You're almost never interpreting between a husband and a wife or a mother and a daughter or any of those kinds of intimate relationships and we do that all day long in VRS. So all of



that implicit information and family members' names that just come flying out of people's mouths/hands is not even something that we see in the community world hardly ever now. If you did, maybe it would be at a wedding or something like that – you know there is an interpreter and working with that, but these [VRS calls] are like peoples' intimate moments and they don't want to feel like there is an interpreter there even though they know there is. So having a team there can make it so much smoother so they can have an actual personal connection with their family that they can't get any other way because they both don't know sign language. That's not a standard practice. My standard practice is more teaming!

Another idea that Charlie had was to educate the deaf consumers and say:

FYI, you may have two interpreters on your call and not know it and the whole point is to make your call go smoothly. I would think that deaf people would be on board with anything that makes a call more successful.

Charlie mentioned her dream world of teaming in VRS as well:

In a dream world somebody would know about me that I need a little time, a little space to process before you are feeding me all kinds of stuff and if I need something I'll give you a hand signal or I'll say 'What was that name?' or whatever.

Lastly, she talks about the lack of attention people pay while teaming and the frustrating component to that. She adds:

I think it would be so easy to set up some basic standards like hey when somebody calls a team pay attention or you know maybe don't bring your phone over because what do you need your phone for when you're teaming.

Terri had a similar explanation regarding teaming and knowing ahead of time what the on-camera interpreter needed:

As for a standard practice it would be some way to notify the team coming in what it is we need. Ya know, it could be something that was in the computer, a program or something that we could ... click on just real quick and move your mouse over and it would bring up something when the team interpreter came on. They could look at your screen and go 'oh, it's bad audio' or have like a list of options they could pick from and then be able to click on that and have it up on the screen because then that way the 'on' interpreter is struggling with whatever they are struggling with [in the call] and now they are also struggling with how am I going to tell you what it is I need and still try to keep up with what's going on or clarify if needed. All trying to do that without letting anyone know what's going on. My biggest would be letting people know what it is that I need so if there was a way I could click on something that would come up with a list of things, like, 'I can't hear,' or 'can't understand the hearing person,' poor video,' '911 call,' 'legal situation,' and there's more than what I listed: job interview, conference call, something that would let me let the person know what I need. I think that would start the whole thing to make it into a smooth transition of having this team come because when you're not in a call and you come in half way or part way into it, you have no clue who, what's the relationship, what's the topic, what do you need. You know, I mean, bad video is the most obvious, but anything outside of that is, I have no clue.

The ideas that the participants shared were very similar and it seems that if information were known ahead of time, before the team interpreter arrives to the call, then a lot of stress would be alleviated and the call would potentially go more smoothly based on the perspectives of the participants in the study.

At the end of her interview, Shawn mentioned something that she believes has an impact on teaming in VRS called “interpersonal stuff.” She talked about how over her years in working in VRS, there seems to be “drama” that occurs between VIs when they work together in an office setting. Her opinion about that is that most experienced interpreters have not had a regular job in an office setting, with the same people all day, every day until they start working in VRS. Those office setting skills are not as developed when working closely with people for long periods of time, which leads to a little bickering and little bits of drama which can affect teaming. She comments:

There’s definitely people that I know that even if I thought that they were really messing up a call that I wouldn’t just uninvitedly go. Without them inviting me [to team] I would not go because one, it would probably mess their thing even worse and secondly, interpersonally it just wouldn’t work out right cuz [*sic*] I know the personalities of each person and I know when I can provide support and when I can’t with certain people. It’s called drama and I stay away from it.

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are parallels of data in both the observations and the interviews that overlap. The things that happened in the observations are the same things that the subjects of the interviews talked about as well. The fact that there are similarities as to what occurs while teaming shows that there are some practices being implemented and used within one VRS call center to make the call successful for everyone involved. Even though the so-called “practices” have not been written down or shared through those who train VIs, these are practices that the VIs themselves create in order to do their job successfully and gain rapport with those they work with daily. It is fascinating to witness this process and to be a part of what could be implemented some day as a way to make teaming in VRS less complicated. It could put everyone on the same playing field, perhaps with just these little insights. It is important to remember that each VI is different and what works for a particular interpreter may be totally useless to another interpreter. It is important to remember those intricacies. Establishing those practices, now or in the future, can be a huge help to interpreters working together. Based on the research and the data collected from the observations and the interviews, there is substantial evidence that there are standard practices for teaming in VRS of some sort, because of what is happening between two Video Interpreters during a call. At the same time, VIs who were interviewed are not completely satisfied with what those teaming practices are, or how they are being implemented.

Here is what I saw occur and heard as teaming practices:

- On-camera interpreter communicated to team by signing below the computer screen to the team or using “ventriloquist” talk to the team interpreter during the call
- Team interpreters fed information to the on-camera interpreter in ASL and/or English depending on the call
- Reassurance/support was given in a non-distracting way to the deaf caller
- Not all VIs plugged in their headset to the Y-cord when they went to team with the on-camera interpreter
- VIs use the white board to communicate to their team
- VIs use their “notepad” icon on the computer to communicate with their team

The basis for this topic of study was from my own observations and experiences with teaming in the VRS setting. I noticed a disconnect, at times, between two VIs working together to process a call, so the thought came to me about what is currently happening with teaming in Video Relay Service. I wanted the research to start small and potentially grow after getting the discussion going about teaming practices in VRS. I decided to do observations of the actual teaming that is happening in VRS at a call center in the Pacific Northwest. From that, I then interviewed three Video Interpreters to get their perspectives and experiences of teaming in the specific setting of VRS. After transcribing and coding the data, I noticed patterns emerging from what I observed as well as what I heard during the interviews. It was fascinating! By starting out on a small scale, I was able to put more time and effort in the thoughts and feelings expressed by the

interpreters I observed and interviewed. Based on what I gathered, it seems as if there are no set-in-stone “standards” of practice happening in VRS, yet there are unspoken teaming practices occurring. Most of the VIs working do what they can to make the call as successful as possible, and sometimes that interaction between an on-camera interpreter and the team interpreter is not so successful and other times it is successful. Why? What is missing, if anything, between the interactions of the VIs working together in VRS?

This study is important because, in my experience, rarely do conversations occur between working VIs about what their preferences are for teaming or how they like to work with a team, etc. When a teaming situation arises, then it is dealt with at that specific time. By not having a prior conversation or negotiating what is needed from each other, the call might not be as successful as it could. My conclusion of the research that asked the question, “What are the current teaming practices in VRS?” is that there are approaches or “standards” for teaming, but VIs are not, for the most part, satisfied with how the teaming is being conducted within VRS. Interpreting on a two-dimensional screen is very different from interpreting in the “real” world with actual people in the same location as the interpreter. Most of the time and usually in the three-dimensional setting/”real” world an interpreter has some background knowledge of the subject, persons involved, type of interpreting assignment, whether a team interpreter will be assigned, duration of the job, etc. All of that pertinent information is essentially a guess by Video Interpreters in the VRS sector. Calls are coming in from all over the United States of America from all different types of signing styles, dialects, topics, history of the context/content and many other details to which the interpreters are not always privy. By adding a fourth person, a team interpreter, to the mix can be overwhelming and/or

helpful. Based on the interviews, most of the time a VI wants a team interpreter for “another set of eyes.” The idea of that concept is great, but if there are no approaches or ways of setting up what that will look like between the two VIs working together, then the point of having a team is null and void. After analyzing the data, it was apparent that the interviewees were stuck as to what kind of standard practices they would like in teaming in VRS. Information was gathered that there should be more dialogue occurring about teaming needs as well as just simply teaming more often. The more times interpreters are working together, the more time they are able to develop that rhythm of working together and understanding the needs over time. Breaking down the raw data into the categories used helped to shed light on the teaming practices that are – or are not – happening within VRS today.

Upon completing my research, I gained a better understanding of the teaming practices in Video Relay Service. Communication is a huge part of an interpreter’s job and being clear about the needs and values as interpreters can be instrumental for a productive workplace environment. As of now, there are no set teaming standard practices in VRS other than to state “I need a team” by signaling the monitor interpreter that support is needed on the call and teaming “practices” are negotiated as the call goes along. By figuring out what is currently happening with a specific call in that VRS setting, the team interpreter can have a better understanding of the situation, what the VI needs, how to help make the call successful and an overall gratification of teamwork and trust is developed.

## **Implications for future research**

As for further research, someone could look into more call centers and specific companies to see their philosophies of teaming and how VIs handle teaming together. Looking at the bigger picture would give a better rounded view of what is happening when teaming occurs in VRS. Video Relay Service is very challenging work. Each time Video Interpreters go to work, they can rarely predict what is going to happen. Every call is so unique and different. Having a team interpreter there to clarify the information, make sure the caller is being respectful or helping to handle a 911 call can be so valuable for both the Video Interpreter and the team interpreter that is helping out. By developing the current teaming practices within VRS, the interpreters who do this challenging work on a daily basis can have a network of support in place. Some potential problems that may arise are not everyone seeing eye to eye when it comes to the teaming practices. Or, if new practices are established as a result of this and future research, then some people might not like how the standards are put into practice. Another issue that could arise is everyone talking about people's personal habits instead of talking about the work itself. I am hoping this research information will cause everyone to think about the teaming "practices" that seem to be employed now, and perhaps ways to improve any of those "practices."

Since this is a pilot study and little research has been done on the topic of teaming in VRS, there is a lot more that can be done. From the observations and interviews conducted, patterns were found of teaming practices that are implemented in the specific call center I researched. Granted, this does not mean the same teaming practices are happening in all the call centers in America. Maybe in some there are more teaming



practices occurring, or maybe there are none at all. I believe this topic could be explored and much more research could be realized in terms of making teaming between Video Interpreters much more successful. Interpreting is a field of professionalism and continual growth. By investigating what is happening between interpreters who work together, perhaps some communication can start and teaming practices can be implemented so VIs are on the same page ... at least to some degree.

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## APPENDIX A

Interview questions:

1. How long have you been interpreting? How long have you been interpreting specifically within Video Relay Service?
2. Are you satisfied with the current teaming practices within Video Relay Service? Why or why not?
3. What are the main reasons (be as specific as possible, please) that you ask for a team?
4. Do you notice a difference between teaming practices in the community (3-D world) compared to the VRS (2-D world)? What are the differences? What are the similarities?
5. How does the “communication” between you and the team happen once they arrive to your station?
6. If you could devise any type of standard practice for teaming within VRS, what would it be and why?

## APPENDIX B

WESTERN OREGON UNIVERSITY

College of Education

### Informed Consent for Research Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project:

#### Current Teaming Practices in Video Relay Service

Principal Investigator: Stacey L. Rainey

Office Phone: (503) 838-8322 e-mail: rainey@sou.edu

Cell Phone: (503) 799-3979

**Background:** Interpreting in Video Relay Service (VRS) is anecdotally known to be one of the hardest venues of interpreting within the field of ASL/English interpretation. Interpreters are often working alone in a cubicle while interpreting a variety of phone calls between Deaf and hearing people. The interpreter usually has no idea what the call content will be and frequently they are dealing with cultural mediation between two people who may have completely different backgrounds. The Video Interpreter (VI) must juggle many tasks at once while interpreting. Requesting a team interpreter to assist in the call is a common occurrence in VRS work.

The purpose of this study of “Current Teaming Practices in Video Relay Service” is to look at the current practices of teaming in VRS. The study will provide insight as to what teaming practices are effective, and those that are not as effective. The goal of this research is to explain how the teaming experience within VRS can be successful for all people involved, and to have a clearer communication experience of teaming practices in VRS.

**Methods:** The research design entails interviews and observations. I will go to a local VRS call center and observe Video Interpreters working during a day shift and an evening shift. While observing, I will take field notes of what I notice with regard to teaming practices. I will interview Video Interpreters who are willing to talk about their teaming practices, keeping all information confidential. Each interview will last no more than one hour. The observations will occur during a four- to eight-hour shift.

**Risks:** Not applicable

*It is important for you to understand that you may withdraw from the investigation at any time without prejudice or effect on your relationship to Western Oregon University. Likewise, you may refuse any specific measurement without affecting your value in the present study.*

**Benefits:** By identifying the current teaming practices in Video Relay Service, the goal will be to establish common teaming practices that can be utilized by Video Interpreters in a particular call center. If those practices are deemed to be effective, perhaps a larger body of Video Interpreters would adapt those teaming practices to a variety of Video Relay Service venues.

The results will be kept confidential and anonymity will be maintained (your name will not be recorded on the data sheets).

**This study has been reviewed and approved by the Western Oregon University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Should you have any questions or concerns throughout the course of the study, you may contact Stacey Rainey by phone or e-mail. If you have questions/concerns regarding your treatment as a subject, you may contact the Chair of the WOU Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 503-838-9200 or via e-mail at irb@wou.edu.**

**You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.**

**APPENDIX C**

**WESTERN OREGON UNIVERSITY**

**College of Education**

**Informed Consent for Research Involving Human Subjects**

Title of Project:

**Current Teaming Practices in Video Relay Service**

Principal Investigator: Stacey L. Rainey

Office Phone: (503) 838-8322 e-mail: rainey@sou.edu

Cell Phone: (503) 799-3979

I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby give my consent to participate in the research study entitled “Current Teaming Practices in Video Relay Service,” details of which have been provided to me above, including anticipated benefits, risks, and potential complications.

I fully understand that I may withdraw from this research project at any time without prejudice or effect on my professional career. I also understand that I am free to ask questions about any techniques or procedures that will be undertaken.

I understand that in the unlikely event of physical injury resulting from research procedures that the investigators will assist the subjects in obtaining medical care; however, payment for the medical care will be the responsibility of the subject. Western Oregon University will not provide financial compensation for medical care.

Finally, I understand that the information about me obtained during the course of this study will be kept confidential unless I consent to its release. (*Return signature page to researcher; keep remaining pages for your records.*)

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Participant’s Signature

I hereby certify that I have given an explanation to the above individual of the contemplated study and its risks and potential complications.

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Principal Investigator



## **APPENDIX D**

### **Explanation of interview and observation code**

The coding for the observations and interviews happened in chunks of information. After chunking the experiences that were observed and interviewed, patterns were noted of the similarities and differences that arose during data collection. After transcribing each interview verbatim, I read, and reread, and reread each of the transcripts many times to catch the commonalities of teaming in VRS. The data was broken down into four main categories based on the interview questions. The four categories were: satisfaction of current teaming practices, reasons for using a team, ways of teaming in VRS—pre-call, during a call and post call, and standard practice ideas. I highlighted the various sections where examples were explained and/or direct explanations of what happens between a team of interpreters in VRS based on the categories created. I took specific examples from each category to give substance to what the interviewee experienced. For the observations, categories from the findings were created based on the interview questions asked, and then codes were created for the observation based on what was found to be true in the interviews. There were many similarities between the observations between teams working together, and what the interviewees talked about.