

Frequently Asked Questions regarding Auslan Accessibility in Alcoholics Anonymous

(Thanks to Teresa K. DCM, District 7 Southern Minnesota Area 36 for her information & experience) – some wording has been changed to reflect the Australian experience.

Hearing members of AA enjoy the privilege of being in every meeting we attend. Whether we *hear* anything is entirely up to us. Hearing AAs can choose from dozens of meetings every week, a variety of formats, times and locations, based on our personal preferences and convenience. It's the same with AA service: we can choose to participate at any level, no matter our skills, qualifications, or financial condition. If we have the willingness to serve, we will find long-standing structures in place (including funding) that will support our desire to learn and grow and give back to this thing that has saved our lives.

However, our Deaf members must rely on Australian Sign Language (Auslan) interpreters to be a part of *any* AA function.

When we talk about Auslan access, the principles embodied in our Responsibility Statement are consistently overshadowed by concerns about the expense. We hearing members are quick to raise financial concerns, and to suggest alternatives other than professional Auslan interpreters. In response, what follows is a list of common questions and answers about Auslan access in AA.

**Throughout this document, "Deaf" stands to represent "Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing."*

1. Is it breaking anonymity for an Auslan interpreter to be at an AA meeting?

No. Whether it's an open or closed meeting, the Auslan interpreters are present as a tool of accessibility. Certified, professional interpreters are bound by a code of ethics, including confidentiality.

To address potential concerns, an interpreted meeting may choose to include a statement in their format, explaining the purpose of the interpreter, and mentioning their professional ethic of confidentiality.

2. How much do Auslan interpreters cost?

The current rate \$120 per hour after 6 pm.

SERVICES	Minimum charge Business Hours		After Hours rate
	(8.00am-6.00pm Monday to Friday)		
Auslan Interpreting	\$197.00	\$98.50	\$120.00
Court Interpreting	\$220.00	\$110.00	\$120.00
NDIS Bookings	\$244.00	\$122.00	\$122.00
Video Remote Interpreting	\$197.00	\$98.50	\$120.00
Notetaking	\$90.00	\$45.00	\$54.00.

3. Why do Auslan interpreters cost money?

American Sign Language is not merely English shorthand: it is a complete language with its own rules for grammar and sentence structure. Auslan interpreters are professionals who make their living translating spoken English into Auslan. They work in a wide variety of settings. Further, they translate Auslan into English, serving as the voice of Deaf people.

Auslan interpreters went to school to become fluent in Auslan and knowledgeable about Deaf culture. To practice as interpreters, they must be certified by a professional licensing body. Their certification is proof of their ability and their commitment to their code of ethics. Like other licensed professionals, interpreters are required to participate in annual continuing professional education to maintain their professional standing.

Concept 11 speaks to the need for our Trustees and world service administration to “always have the assistance of the best possible standing committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs and consultants” (from “Twelve Concepts for World Service” in the *AA Service Manual*, p. 46). It follows that we would apply the same standard to the Auslan interpreters we hire to help us bridge the language barrier between Deaf and hearing members. Further on, Concept 11 discusses how paid workers should be compensated: “in reasonable relation to the value of his or her similar services or abilities in the commercial world” (p. 55).

4. Why can't Auslan interpreters volunteer their time and expertise?

In fact, some interpreters have at times offered their services free of charge. Most of these professionals aren't members our fellowship, so accepting such offers violates our 7th Tradition, as does imposing upon interpreters who happen to be AA members. The long form of Tradition 8 makes this clear: "But we may employ alcoholics where they are going to perform those services for which we might otherwise have to engage non alcoholics. Such special services may be well recompensed." We don't expect the doctors, mechanics, or custodians among us to volunteer their professional expertise in the service of our meetings or events. We don't seek charity from professionals.

Further, a drawback to relying on volunteers is that they are under no obligation to keep the commitment. Coffee makers, greeters, and meeting chairs are easily covered, but we will be hard-pressed to find a substitute volunteer interpreter. When our meeting or event is advertised as Auslan accessible, Deaf members count on an interpreter being present. Without an interpreter, they cannot participate, contributing to the isolation they already suffer due to alcoholism. Since interpreted meetings are the exception, odds are that the Deaf member won't be able to just "pick up" a different meeting in a day or two.

5. Why not use government funded interpreters? The American Experience.

Some members consider accepting government funding to be an outside contribution, violating our 7th Tradition. For those of us who don't see such a conflict, it's important to understand that government funding is not readily and reliably available. The availability of these services comes and goes based on the current political climate. And, as it is with any government-run program, there are arbitrary rules for qualification. Here are some examples of Minnesota AA's experience with government funding:

- For many years, the State of Minnesota's Division of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services provided the ASL interpreter at both Three Legacies in Hopkins, and Tradition Five in Golden Valley. Then, a time came when the State discontinued the funding. Gratefully, each of these meetings decided to include the interpreter as a necessary expense of their meeting (like rent, and coffee), so Deaf members didn't lose access to these meetings.

- As a result of the same funding cut, a Deaf member in Two Harbors, MN, faced the same issue. However, his group did not pick up the expense. He was cut off from AA, until a local interpreter (a non-AA member) took pity and offered to volunteer her time and services.
- Today, the State contracts with a not for profit organization to administer a grant that provides short-term, “bridge” funds to help alcoholics connect with AA in their community. Funding is granted at the request of an individual Minnesotan—not to the meeting. While there isn’t a strict time or dollar limit on the funding, there is the expectation that the local AA community must figure out how to provide ASL access in the long-term.

The grant program doesn’t cover interpreter requests within the Twin City metro because there are already numerous interpreted meetings.

6. Why can’t members who know some Auslan serve as interpreters?

Knowing enough Auslan to be conversant with our Deaf fellows isn’t the same as being fluent in Auslan. And being fluent in Auslan isn’t the same as being an interpreter who is trained and qualified to effectively translate between the two languages/cultures.

7. Can we use student interpreters? Like interns, they would gain experience. Students aren’t bound by the same confidentiality ethic as certified interpreters. Also, student interpreters are still learning the vocabulary of Auslan, as well as cultural nuances. .For example, one of our Deaf members attended a meeting with a student interpreter. The student was well-meaning and did their best, but the student had neither the understanding of what we mean by “Higher Power,” nor the language skills to convey such a concept. The student signed “Jesus” every time “Higher Power” was said.

It is suggested we think about it this way: “Even if you're willing to let a student dentist work on your teeth, they're not allowed to do so without supervision from a qualified professional. Should we expect a student interpreter to come into an AA setting and work without the safety net and supervision of a qualified professional? What is at stake for the Deaf alcoholic when the AA message isn’t interpreted accurately?”

8. Why don't Deaf members pay for the interpreters they need?

Some of our Deaf members have at times paid for interpreters out of their own pockets, but this conflicts with our Preamble, “There are no dues or fees for AA membership.”

It is a common misconception that interpreters are solely for Deaf alcoholics, which infers that hearing members don't benefit from the mutual exchange of experience, strength, and hope between Deaf and hearing members. In truth, we are all better served when the voices of our Deaf members are included in our group conscience.

“If the expression of God is the group conscience, then we also have the responsibility to make sure that our group conscience is the fullest, broadest, and most inclusive expression of a loving God as is possible...If I truly believe that God shows up in the group conscience, then I don't want God to be limited by a group conscience that only represents part of AA” (Curt K., Area 36 Delegate, Panel 67, *Lifeline*, August 2017).

When we take on uslan access as a collective responsibility, it allows us to include accessible meetings on our meeting schedules. That, in turn, increases the odds that the still suffering, Deaf alcoholics will find a solution for their alcoholic problem.

9. Will paying for Auslan cause a decrease in contributions to the service entities?

We know that our service entities count on contributions to pay for the services they provide, and on which we rely. Our 5th Tradition says our primary purpose is to carry the message to the alcoholic who still suffers. In that light, our 7th Tradition contributions are applied first to group expenses, then we “split” any remaining funds to our service entities. Wherever Deaf members are seeking access to meetings, events, and service opportunities, making that access a reality—access that hearing AAs readily enjoy—should be taken seriously.

Some groups have found that their decision to take on the expense of providing an Auslan interpreter has actually inspired increased contributions from their members. They now provide the vital service of Auslan access *and* send larger splits to the service entities.

A reminder: in all discussions regarding access (of any kind), we must be mindful of our tone: our debates consistently give our Deaf members the distinct impression that we see them only as a financial burden, and not the AA members that they actually are.

10. Won't this new expense require members to contribute more each week?

Maybe. Those advocating for Auslan access understand that the expense of interpreters is real, and substantial. However, it isn't insurmountable. Perhaps one way to manage costs would be to consolidate the number of events we have in AA, and then make sure those events are accessible to our Deaf members.

We AAs have proven that we are resourceful people. If there is something we want to do—brewing up gallons of coffee, bringing in speakers to celebrate home group anniversaries, hosting sober picnics and conferences—we make it happen. Why would ASL access be any different?

11. But isn't it a lot of money for just one—or even a few—Deaf members?

This rationale contradicts our principles: it attaches a dollar sign to our Deaf members, and it centres the discussion on personalities. If we choose to accept this reasoning, our Deaf fellows will never merit full access to the Three Legacies we claim are necessary for own recovery and spiritual growth—not because they don't want it, but because the hearing majority of our Fellowship chose to deny them the opportunity.

Our AA service activities are supported by voluntary contributions from groups and individual members, both financially and people-wise. If members weren't willing to volunteer our time and labour, AA service simply couldn't happen. And if our structures of financial support weren't in place, our pool of trusted servants would be limited to only those who could afford to pay their own way.

For example, our service structures typically pay mileage reimbursements to trusted servants for travel to service events. We do this to ensure that service does not become the elite privilege of only those who can afford it. It is this same principle behind the idea that we should pay for AUSLAN interpretation services whenever they are required. We should not limit anyone's ability to serve nor unwittingly limit service to one an elite few—in this case, hearing members.

In every aspect of AA life, we know newcomers are our lifeblood. In budgeting our expenses, we demonstrate our core principle that the ability to pay has no bearing on an individual's status as a member of our Fellowship, or their eligibility to participate in our collective service responsibilities.

Those of us who can afford to kick in a little more to make sure our doors remain open. Experience tells us that as new people recover and rebuild their lives, they'll begin to contribute financially. However, service is something each of us can do immediately. We're all familiar with the lifeline of self-support that's woven into service opportunities.

12. What about instituting a Green Can (similar to the Pink Can)?

Our 7th Tradition says that voluntary, individual contributions are used to cover group expenses, as determined by our collective group conscience. "Can Plans" contradict our 7th Tradition: they are earmarked contributions that circumvent the group conscience.

The only way to remove the "personality" from the issue of Auslan access, or any other expressed need, is to budget for the expense, as we do for our rent, coffee, and other ongoing expenses. As a body, we know we have Deaf members—we know the only way to effectively bridge the language barrier is via Auslan interpreters.

In budgeting for the expense, we remove the need to continuously debate Auslan access. Which, in turn, will free up time and energy for other 12th Step opportunities. We don't need to debate the need for ASL access—the need has been demonstrated. If we use the tools that are already available to us in budgeting for the expense, we won't dilute our service resources in developing, staffing, and maintaining a separate funding structure.

We can readily agree that there are countless suffering alcoholics we haven't yet reached: we can assume some percentage of them are Deaf. If we make AA accessible, and we alert the Deaf community to the solution that is available here, Deaf newcomers may show up and find that AA is a haven for them as well. We might start making a dent in the problem of alcoholism within the Deaf community.

13. Why don't more Deaf people show up at interpreted meetings?

For the same reasons that hearing people can't always make it to meetings: they might not have transportation, they may have work conflicts, illnesses, family emergencies, and plain, old, everyday alcoholism: sometimes they let their heads talk them out of coming.

When planning special events, we must remember to budget for interpreters, to reserve interpreters early in the planning process, and to include that detail on our flyers.

When we take actions to remove the question about Auslan accessibility, our Deaf members have a better opportunity to participate.

Interpreted meetings are only a part of what it takes for AA to be more inclusive. And welcoming Deaf alcoholics isn't solely the responsibility of our Deaf members. We need hearing members who are willing to sponsor, give rides, visit with Deaf members at meetings, and invite them to coffee and to other fellowship events.

14. Can Deaf members use our written materials if they can't attend meetings?

For Deaf people, Auslan is their first language. Auslan is not a coded form of English. It is a visually spatial language, with no word-for-word translation to English. A Deaf person's comprehension of written English depends on whether, and to what degree, they have studied English as a second language. Some Deaf members may find our written materials useful, but not everyone.

Think about how many of us hearing, English-speaking AAs have relied on sponsorship and book study meetings for help with decoding our literature. Imagine navigating early sobriety in a second language with very few interpreters available!

15. Why don't Deaf people get together and have their own meetings? The USA experience

Several years ago, a small core of Deaf newcomers started an ASL meeting in Minneapolis. Their format was a Big Book study in which the members went around the table. Those with a good understanding of written English, translated a paragraph or two (at a time) into ASL. All members were welcome to share in the discussion, as the spirit moved them. Then the next person would translate another paragraph or two, and so on.

For a variety of reasons, the meeting didn't last long. Primarily, all of the Deaf members were really new. Starting a new meeting is a big commitment; the ability to put principles before personalities without any long-timers to guide them; people started getting jobs that required them to work on meeting day; transportation issues. Sustaining the meeting became too great a burden for the small group whose individual foundations weren't yet solid.

Shared experience from GSO mirrors the experience of our local Deaf AAs: “GSO experience indicates that limiting an AA meeting to a narrow category of AA members may not allow the full, rich message of AA to be available...Our experience is that Deaf members report that attending regular ASL-interpreted meetings of AA helps them with their spiritual condition and often helps them avoid the temptation to feel isolated and relapse. There have been attempts in the past to start up AA meetings conducted in ASL, but often these groups do not get input or feedback from old timers as to how to use the Traditions to keep it an AA meeting. The majority of the participants are new to sobriety and have had very limited exposure to AA meetings, service, and the AA Traditions. These groups often do not have the experience, strength, and hope offered from AA meetings that have participants with long-term sobriety and experience in service.”

16. What about investing in speech-to-text technology?

There are several reasons that this technology is not an effective solution:

- Auslan interpreters translate English to Auslan, and Auslan to English. Relying on speech-to-text would limit our Deaf members to receivers only—they would not be able to participate in the discussion.
- Many Deaf people don’t have a sufficient understanding of written English.
- Deaf members would be focused on a screen, cut off from other visual cues that allow them to “read” the tone of the discussion.
- There is a wide variety of accents and inflections among English speakers. Many of us stumble on our words and rely on fillers that add no meaning.

17. If we do this, where will it end? Who, or what, will be next?

For those of us who are lucky enough to have found a solution to our alcoholism in AA, it’s not ours to determine who gets to be here. However, it is our responsibility to do what we can to level the playing field, so that any alcoholic who is seeking this solution will find a home here.

If we make AA accessible to Deaf alcoholics, we can anticipate that more Deaf alcoholics will find us. Word will get out that AA may have a solution to their alcoholic problem, and that our Fellowship is available to them.

We cannot know who will come next, or how we will be asked to rise to that occasion. We can only do the footwork to ensure that those who come to AA will find it a place of inclusion. “We put our trust in God, rather than our finite selves.”

(Thanks to Teresa K DCM, District
7 Southern Minnesota Area 36 for
her information & experience).