

ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH

SIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

PHILOSOPHY AND POLICY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Section</u>
Sign Language Communication Philosophy.....	1
Sign Language Communication Policy	2
Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI) Rating Scale	A
Alabama Department of Mental Health Staff Sign Language Communication Skill Level Standards and Minimum Entry Skill Levels.....	B

STAFF SIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION PHILOSOPHY AND POLICY

1 Sign Language Communication Philosophy

Among the one in five Alabamians who will need mental health services in their lifetimes are more than 39,000 people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Because deafness or hearing loss pose their own challenges in coping with risk factors and accessing and receiving treatment services, the Alabama Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation has established an Office of Deaf Services to break down the barriers that inhibit the department in its mission to enable Alabamians to live in recovery.

The overarching goal of the *Alabama Department of Mental Health Sign Language Communication Philosophy and Policy* are to support Alabama Department of Mental Health staff members and contract providers serving deaf or hard of hearing consumers in reaching her/his maximum potential and to support an optimal setting of communication for all deaf individuals in the Alabama Department of Mental Health service continuum. Recognizing the role that open and abundant communication plays in recovery, Alabama Department of Mental Health affirms the right of consumers to understand all communication and to be understood by all people in the mental health service delivery continuum.. Alabama Department of Mental Health staff and contract providers who are employed to work with the deaf and hard of hearing populations are expected to use sign language at all times whenever they are on duty and in the presence of an individual who is deaf and uses sign language.

All Alabama Department of Mental Health consumers are entitled to effective communication in the language of their preference, based on their individual needs and abilities, including the use of American Sign Language (ASL).

Because many consumers who are deaf will also have significant dysfluency, it is important that Alabama Department of Mental Health staff members and contract providers serving deaf and hard of hearing consumers provide positive language role models. Staff members must be able to recognize, respect, and reinforce the individual communicative potential and skills of each consumer. They need to be able to design and employ a flexible approach to communication that will best facilitate each consumer's development of sign language skills. Likewise, it is important for Alabama Department of Mental Health staff and contract providers serving deaf and hard of hearing consumers, to learn about and respect the cultural diversity that exists in the Deaf community. The Alabama Department of Mental Health is committed to giving employees and employees of contract providers serving deaf and hard of hearing consumers the opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding of American Sign Language and Deaf culture and how deafness impacts treatment for individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

2 Sign Language Communication Policy

In order for Alabama Department of Mental Health to fulfill its mission, it is critically important for staff members working with consumers who use American Sign Language to have the communication skills necessary for effective communication. Alabama Department of Mental Health and its contract providers serve a diverse population of consumers. In recognition of and respect for this consumer diversity, Alabama Department of Mental Health embraces a team concept where staff members, as a team, possess the skills and knowledge needed to work with all consumers. All staff members working with the deaf or hard of hearing populations are encouraged to develop their sign language communication skills to their maximum potential. The Alabama Department of Mental Health recognizes that the level of these skills and the need to require and encourage these skills will vary across disciplines and levels of responsibility. In consideration of this, after carefully analysis of the frequency, length and criticality of interaction required with deaf-and-hard of hearing persons, sign language communication skills level standards based on the Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI) Rating Scale, and a timeline for achieving these standards, have been established and approved by the Alabama Department of Mental Health, Office of Deaf Services for selected job positions (see Appendixes A and B). In addition, as shown in Appendix B, minimum sign language communication skill levels required at time of job entry (hire, promotion, transfer, reassignment, reclassification, demotion) have also been established and approved by the Alabama Department of Mental Health Office of Deaf Services for selected positions. For some job positions, the communication requirements of the job require that a person be at the standard at time of job entry. In order to better support an optimal setting of communication for all individuals across the Alabama Department of Mental Health continuum, changes and additions may be made to the skill levels listed in Appendix B. Approval by the Alabama Department of Mental Health Office of Deaf Services is required for all sign language communication

skill level standards and entry skill levels for Alabama Department of Mental Health job positions, including recommended changes for current standards and entry skill levels and skill level standards and entry skill levels for additional positions.

To assist Alabama Department of Mental Health staff members, contract providers serving deaf and hard of hearing consumers and consumers in developing their sign language communication skills to their maximal potential, Alabama Department of Mental Health selected the SLPI as the assessment tool for use with staff and contract providers serving deaf and hard of hearing consumers. The SLPI was selected for use by Alabama Department of Mental Health because results may be used (1) to identify how well individuals can use sign language for communication, and (2) to assist them in identifying appropriate sign language communication skill development opportunities (3) to mark their linguistic advances.

The SLPI is a nationally recognized sign language assessment process that was developed during the early 1980's by William Newell and Dr. Frank Caccamise of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. The SLPI is widely used among schools and agencies serving deaf and hard-of-hearing persons.

For Alabama Department of Mental Health staff members, community mental health providers and other contract providers working with deaf and hard of hearing populations hired prior to the approval of this policy on May 1, 2006, the standards in Appendix B are considered as goals, with participation in the SLPI process done within the context of a staff development model and the Alabama Department of Mental Health staff or contract provider's appraisal process. For Alabama Department of Mental Health staff members and employees of contract providers serving deaf and hard of hearing consumers hired after date this policy approved, standards are required. If a staff member hired prior to May 1, 2006, accepts a new position at Alabama Department of Mental Health or with contract providers working with deaf and hard of hearing populations, s/he is required (a) to satisfy the minimum job entry skill level, and (b) to achieve and maintain the skill level standard for this new position. Individuals hired for job positions with skill level standards will be informed of these standards and minimum entry skill levels in their offer of employment letters. These staff members must participate in the SLPI process on a regular basis until they have achieved their skill level standards and their expectations for taking the SLPI on a regular basis.

Staff members in positions with skill level standards are encouraged and supported in the development of their sign language communication skills as Alabama Department of Mental Health and/or the contract provider's resources allow. If a staff member's sign language communication skills are not at the level considered necessary for her/his job position, s/he may be required to attend sign language classes and to take other appropriate steps to improve these skills. Performance that does not meet expectations during the review period, including, but not limited to failure to improve sign language communication skills, is handled in accordance with Office of Deaf Services policy. If staff members with a job entry dates after May 1, 2006, do not achieve their skill level standards within their timelines, they are not allowed to continue employment in the same positions or any other positions with a standard above their current skill levels. A staff member having a job entry

date after May 1, 2006, who does not achieve her/his skill level standard, may be required to resign, be reassigned or terminated from employment at Alabama Department of Mental Health in accordance with the agency's progressive discipline policy. Similar policies are in place with several contract providers in order to comply with community program standards.

Alabama Department of Mental Health will extend every effort to recruit and hire people with sign language communication skills, taking into consideration other expertise and skills required for each job position. For positions with sign language communication skill level standards, efforts will be extended to recruit people who are at or above these standards at time of hire. If there are no qualified candidates with the required minimum entry skill level for a job position, exceptions may be made via an approved Alabama Department of Mental Health Office of Deaf Services waiver process.

Appendix A

SIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY INTERVIEW (SLPI) RATING SCALE^{a,b}

<u>RATINGS</u>	<u>DESCRIPTORS^c</u>
<u>Superior Plus</u>	Able to have a fully shared and natural conversation, with in-depth elaboration for both social and work topics. All aspects of signing are native-like.
<u>Superior</u>	Able to have a fully shared conversation, with in-depth elaboration for both social and work topics. Very broad sign language vocabulary, near native-like production and fluency, excellent use of sign language grammatical features, and excellent comprehension for normal signing rate.
<u>Advanced Plus</u>	Exhibits some Superior level skills, but not <u>all</u> and not <u>consistently</u>.
<u>Advanced</u>	Able to have a generally shared conversation with good, spontaneous elaboration for both social and work topics. Broad sign language vocabulary knowledge and clear, accurate production of signs and fingerspelling at a normal/near-normal rate; occasional misproductions do not detract from conversational flow. Good use of many sign language grammatical features and comprehension good for normal signing rate.
<u>Intermediate Plus</u>	Exhibits some Advanced level skills, but not all and not consistently.
<u>Intermediate</u>	Able to discuss with some confidence routine social and work topics within a conversational format with some elaboration; generally 3-to-5 sentences. Good knowledge and control of everyday/basic sign language vocabulary with some sign vocabulary errors. Fairly clear signing at a moderate signing rate with some sign misproductions. Fair use of some sign language grammatical features and fairly good comprehension for a moderate-to-normal signing rate; a few repetitions and rephrasing of questions may be needed.

Survival Plus Exhibits some Intermediate level skills, but not all and not consistently.

Survival **Able to discuss basic social and work topics with responses generally 1-to-3 sentences in length.** Some knowledge of basic sign language vocabulary with many sign vocabulary and/or sign production errors. Slow-to-moderate signing rate. Basic use of a few sign language grammatical features. Fair comprehension for signing produced at a slow-to-moderate rate with some repetition and rephrasing.

Novice Plus Exhibits some Survival level skills, but not all and not consistently.

Novice **Able to provide single sign and some short phrase/sentence responses to basic questions signed at a slow-to-moderate rate with frequent repetition and rephrasing.** Vocabulary primarily related to everyday work and/or social areas such as basic work-related signs, family members, basic objects, colors, numbers, names of weekdays, and time. Production and fluency characterized by many sign production errors and by a slow rate with frequent inappropriate pauses/hesitations.

No Functional **(May be) Able to provide short single sign and "primarily"**

Skills **fingerspelled responses to some basic questions signed at a slow rate with extensive repetition and rephrasing.**

^aAdapted from US Foreign Service Institute and ACTFL LPI Rating Scales by Drs. William Newell and Frank Caccamise

^bThe SLPI was referred to as the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI) from 1983 to May 2006.

^cFor all SCPI rating descriptors, **first statement (in bold type) always a statement of ASL communicative functioning**, with all remaining statements (regular type) descriptors of ASL form (vocabulary, production, fluency, grammar, and comprehension).

Appendix B

Alabama Department of Mental Health Staff Sign Language Communication Skill Level Standards and Minimum Entry Skill Levels

All skill levels are based on the Sign Language Proficiency Interview (SLPI). Timeline for achieving standards, if standards not required at job entry (hire, promotion, transfer, reassignment, reclassification, and demotion), is four years from date of job entry. The preferred skill level at entry is always the standard skill level (or above). If no applicant has the minimum entry skill level, exceptions may be made via an approved Alabama Department of Mental Health waiver process. If this occurs, a temporary contract may be offered and an adjustment in the timeline for achieving the standard may be made.

DIVISION: CENTRAL OFFICE

DEPARTMENT	JOB POSITION	SIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION SKILL LEVEL	
		STANDARD	MINIMUM ENTRY SKILL LEVEL
Central Office	Director	Advanced Plus	Advanced Plus
Central Office	State Coordinator, Interpreting	Interpreter Certification + QMHI	Interpreter Certification + QMHI
Central Office	Administrative Assistant	Survival	None

DIVISION: COMMUNITY SERVICES

DEPARTMENT	JOB POSITION	SIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION SKILL LEVEL	
		STANDARD	MINIMUM ENTRY SKILL LEVEL
Regional/Community	Regional Coordinator for the Deaf	Advanced	Advanced
Regional/Community	Regional Coordinator, Interpreting	Interpreter Certification + QMHI	Interpreter Certification

Regional/Community	Interpreter Trainee	Interpreter Certification + QMHI	Advanced
Regional/Community	Administrative Assistant	Survival	None
Regional/Community	Case Manager	Intermediate Plus	Intermediate Plus
Regional/Community	Director of Group Homes for the Deaf	Advanced	Advanced
Regional/Community	Group Home Manager	Advanced	Advanced
Regional/Community	Group Home Staff	Intermediate	Intermediate

DIVISION: FACILITY/HOSPITAL

DEPARTMENT	JOB POSITION	SIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATON SKILL LEVEL	
		STANDARD	MINIMUM ENTRY SKILL LEVEL
Facility	Director	Advanced Plus	Advanced Plus
Facility	Administrative Assistant ⁽¹⁾	Survival	None
Facility	Staff Interpreter	Interpreter Certification + QMHI	Interpreter Certification
Facility	ASL Communication Specialist	Superior	Superior
Facility	Interpreter Trainee	Interpreter Certification + QMHI	Advanced
Facility	Psychologist	Advanced	Advanced
Facility	Social Worker	Advanced	Advanced
Facility	Recreational Therapist	Advanced	Advanced
Facility	Nurse ⁽²⁾	Intermediate	None
Facility	Deaf Care Worker	Advanced	Advanced

NOTE: These positions work together following a team concept. This team concept allows for a combination of skills and knowledge needed to work with all consumers and employees. Therefore, not all positions must demonstrate a minimum entry skill level and standard of Advanced.

(1) Temporary employees are exempt from signing requirements, unless otherwise stated.

(2) Nurses have three years from the date of employment to achieve the required standard.