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Collaboration in the Face of Emergencies: The Birth of the First Emergency Response Interpreter Credential in the United States

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Abstract

In 2015, various agencies in the state of Arizona developed a unique program for providing communication access to Deaf and hard of hearing citizens during emergencies. The training for American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and Communication Access Real-Time (CART) captioners, the support of state and local emergency response management teams, and the wide-spread utilization of these services is unprecedented. This paper spotlights Vicki Bond, the developer and coordinator of the Emergency Response Interpreter Credential (ERIC) program, the first of its kind nationwide.

A Call for Help

In 2017, Hurricane Irma devastated parts of Florida. Many state and local officials were seen on television, providing updates and safety information about evacuations. For the Deaf individuals in Manatee County, however, the emergency messages they received were gibberish. “Pizza...bear monster...pray wait water,” (Caron, 2017). Although the path of the hurricane had been known for days, county officials failed to prepare a qualified interpreter for their televised briefings and instead utilized the services of a local lifeguard who was not fluent and had no interpreting experience.

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This event made national news. It highlighted an issue that has long been recognized in the disability communities but is fairly unknown in the mainstream - a systemic lack of effective communication for Deaf and hard of hearing residents during emergencies. Unfortunately, this issue often does not get the attention it deserves until disaster strikes. Several Deaf families were affected by the 2018 Camp Fire near Paradise, CA, the deadliest fire in the state's history (The Daily Moth, 2018). Deaf individuals have also been evacuated without warning from the 2017 Tubbs Fire (The Daily Moth, 2018) and the recent unprecedented flooding in Nebraska (The Daily Moth, n.d.). Although the danger in these situations is clear, most states have no protocol in place for communicating emergency information to their Deaf, Deaf-Blind, and hard of hearing citizens. According to Ivey, et al (2014) researchers "review(ed)...55 Emergency Operation Plans (EOP) from various states and territories in the United States...55% of the EOPs mentioned vulnerable populations, but only 31% of the EOPs specifically mentioned Deaf and hard of hearing populations" (Russell, et al, 2018).

Emergency response agencies and advocates in the Deaf and hard of hearing communities in Arizona set out to change the way information is disseminated to these vulnerable populations. The product of their ongoing partnership is the Emergency Response Interpreting Credential (ERIC), a one-of-a-kind training program for a core team of interpreters who are assigned to emergency incidents all over the state. The person at the forefront of the design and implementation of this program is local Phoenix interpreter, interpreter educator, and Deaf community ally, Vicki Bond.

The Playdate that Changed a Life

Bond's first introduction to the world of Deaf culture and ASL was during her idyllic summers on her grandpa's Arkansas farm. She befriended a Deaf boy in the area who was lonely for playmates during summer break. This was Bond's first exposure to sign language.

As time went on, sign language was "always in (her) peripheral" (Bond, personal communication, July 10, 2019). Whether it was seeing interpreters at church or practicing fingerspelling with other kids in school, Bond was often surrounded by some aspect of Deaf culture.

It was not until she was ready for college that she discovered signed language interpreting was a feasible career. Choosing interpreting as her major at the University of Arizona, she set her sights on becoming a professional interpreter and set in motion a series of events that would change the interpreting community in Arizona.

A Journey Through the Field

After graduating from the University of Arizona, Bond began her professional career as an educational interpreter in a K-12 setting. She was quick to realize that the K-12 environment was not the best fit for her and, after a year, decided she wanted to pursue aspects of the field that would give her more professional autonomy.

To gain the skill and experience she felt she needed to become an effective freelance interpreter, Bond enrolled in the Masters of Interpreting program at Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts university in the world to cater to Deaf and Hard of Hearing students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, Gallaudet houses “the world’s only interpretation B.A., M.A., and PhD program in an American Sign Language-immersive environment” (About Gallaudet, n.d.). During her time at Gallaudet, Bond was able to expand her professional experience by working in various settings. She credits much of her professional growth to the amazing professional mentors that she worked closely with during her time in Washington, D.C.

After passing the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) National Interpretation Certification exam in 2009, Bond moved back to her home state of Arizona where she was employed as a senior public interpreter at the Phoenix Day School for the Deaf. While working at the Deaf school, she was also instrumental in developing a grassroots mentorship program with the help of the Arizona chapter of RID.

In 2013, Bond accepted the position of Interpreter Outreach and Development Coordinator with the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ACDHH). She was able to continue the mentoring program, as well as various other curriculum development and training opportunities, coordinating the interpreting services for the Commission’s several Deaf

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employees, and acted as the staff interpreter for the agency. Her most challenging role at ACDHH, though, began after discussions with local emergency management agencies who were interested in developing a more accessible communication protocol for Arizona's 1.1 million residents with hearing loss (Arizona Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, n.d.).

The First Program of Its Kind

According to the Barrier-Free Emergency Communication Access and Alerting System Research Report (Russell, McLaughlin, and Demko, 2018), "there is awareness on the part of some Emergency Management Organizations (EMOs) about the need to improve access to broadcast communication during times of emergencies" (p. 2), however laws and policies at every level of government neglect to provide consistency for a systemic solution. In Arizona, this issue was originally addressed by the Maricopa County Department of Emergency Management (MCDEM) and the Arizona Department of Emergency and Military Affairs (DEMA). These agencies had identified a gap in their public-facing communication system designed to disseminate information to local communities in the event of an emergency. The issue of emergency communications for Deaf and hard of hearing citizens had been broached several times, however no one knew exactly how to put the pieces together to form an effective solution.

With Bond's previous experience providing trainings and developing curriculum, she was the perfect person to address the issue. She recognized several challenges: convincing state agencies that ASL interpretation and CART providers were necessary, training interpreters for a wide range of emergency response settings and integrating a request for these services with emergency management's existing deployment systems.

Every state has an established state-wide emergency response plan. Little to no consideration is given in these plans for the Deaf and hard of hearing populations within that state. According to Bond, "Unfortunately, historically, (emergency) information has just not been accessible. Media broadcasts are supposed to be captioned. Sometimes they are, sometimes they're not. Or sometimes the way that they're captioned is such that a person with any level of vision loss can't see them. And then there's almost never a sign language interpreter on screen. So, for Deaf community members whose primary language is American Sign Language, they have a really

hard time accessing the information they need to be safe” (ERIC video, 2017). Many emergency managers and broadcasters erroneously believe that captioning alone provides the access needed to the Deaf and hard of hearing communities. However, studies have shown that

Captioning of TV broadcasts is not necessarily effective in communicating information to all Deaf people, due to the literacy demands of technical language that may be used during such events, and variability in the accuracy of real-time captioning. Information delivered in sign language is preferred by many Deaf people, as being more immediately accessible than speech represented imperfectly in print (McKee, 2014, as cited in Russel, et al, 2018).

To address this, Bond met with leadership from several emergency response agencies to explain why their current communication systems were ineffective for the Deaf and hard of hearing communities. She proposed that specially-trained interpreters and CART providers should be automatically included in any deployment of emergency response services, whether a request for these services was received or not. She encouraged interpreters to be included in all video recorded briefings, both for news broadcasts and for social media postings. She also emphasized the need for both interpreters and CART providers to be available at all community meetings, evacuation shelters, and press conferences for any emergency or emergency preparedness training.

Bond emphasized to these agencies that an emergency situation, coupled with a lack of communication, put the Deaf and hard of hearing populations at an increased risk and, therefore, made their chance of injury or death significantly higher than the hearing community. “Because (these) organizations are government-based, it's easy to assume that they don't care. But the individuals within these very robust and cumbersome systems do care - they care very deeply, or they wouldn't do this work” (Bond, personal communication, July 10, 2019). Bond was able to convince all of the agencies involved that this was a relevant issue and her innovative program was the solution.

Her next challenge was integrating the request for ASL interpreting and CART services into the current deployment systems used by emergency management agencies. Seeing as how these

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services had never been requested for emergencies before, Bond knew that designing a separate request protocol for the agencies would be a futile effort. Her goal was to avoid situations where interpreters were an after-thought, a last-minute addition to the emergency communication process. A system like this had never been implemented before, causing many hurdles for implementing Bond's plan. Eventually, agencies were able to integrate interpreters and CART providers into the two systems currently used by Arizona emergency response agencies: Resource Order Support System (ROSS), used primarily for wildland fire response, and Web-Based Emergency Operations Center (WEBEOC), used for all other types of state-wide emergencies. Considering the multiple agencies involved and the bureaucratic complexities of these systems, the significance of this achievement cannot be overstated.

Lastly, Bond knew that training a core group of service providers was going to be the key to effective communication for Deaf and hard of hearing people during emergencies.

Communication used by emergency responders is "nuanced and specific" (Bond, personal communication, July 10, 2019). While emergency incidents are high stress, high risk, and seemingly chaotic, for professionals within the field, the system is also highly structured. These incidents come with their own unique demands, including a heavy emphasis on the specialized jargon used by responders. It was clear that contacting an interpreting agency and asking for any available, untrained signed language interpreter would be a disservice to all parties involved.

To remedy this, Vicki set out to choose an elite group of highly skilled interpreters. They went through a rigorous screening process, not only for interpreting skill, but also for requisites such as availability, personal and family-level preparedness for extended deployments, the ability to work well under pressure, and ethical decision-making. She felt it necessary that ASL interpreters and CART providers received the same kind of training as anyone else who was involved in emergency response. To make sure interpreters were receiving the highest quality education, Vicki arranged for subject matter experts from all of the major emergency response agencies to provide intensive training classes to the ASL interpreting and CART pool. The result of this robust training was a state-recognized certification called the Emergency Response Interpreter Credential (ERIC).

ERIC is now touted as “the first of its kind in scope for training and dispatching American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters and Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) captioning providers to effectively communicate with the Deaf and hard of hearing in case of fire, flood, nuclear disaster, power outage or extreme heat” (Longdon, n.d.). The ERIC program is utilized by several emergency response organizations in Arizona, including the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management, the Southwest Area Incident Management Teams, the Bureau of Land Management, Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station, DEMA, and MCDEM.

The ERIC program and Bond’s role as program director transitioned from ACDHH and is now under the purview of DEMA. To date, ERIC interpreters and CART captioners have been involved in over 35 emergency incidents and emergency preparedness trainings (Bond, personal communication, August 10, 2019). Countless community members have benefited from the services, having access to communication during emergencies like never before.

The Future for ERIC

Bond’s ambitious goals do not stop there. She admits that, “government systems are challenging to navigate and even harder to change. Convincing all of these state agencies that they should do this because it’s the right thing to do,” (Bond, personal communication, July 10, 2019) is no small feat. However, this does not deter Bond. Recent research has shown that there is a dire need for “pro-active preparation via policy development and protocols at the municipal, provincial and federal levels of government” (Russell, et al, 2018, p. 2). As more and more viral videos of unqualified interpreters at press conferences and other emergency incidents spread throughout the internet, the need for a well-designed, robust program like ERIC is evident. Her dream for the next ten years is for more states to institute programs like ERIC, either using her model or designing a new plan that will benefit the communities in their area.

The secret to a successful program, according to Bond, is collaboration. Without the buy-in from various agencies and support from the Deaf and hard of hearing communities, the ERIC program would still be a pipe dream. Bond encourages other leaders to analyze the system in which they

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function to better understand how to benefit various communities. She also encourages working with people who provide insight to various perspectives, stating that the inability to see issues from varied viewpoints can limit the creativity needed to solve the bigger, more impactful problems. Understanding stakeholders' objectives and building on what is already in place are vehicles to help other leaders achieve their goals.

Bond recognizes that her work and the work of the emergency response agencies typically go unnoticed until their services are desperately needed. "I'm glad when people don't know or care," she says, "because they haven't been in an emergency situation" (Bond, personal communication, July 10, 2019). Her humility, however, does not dampen the impact her program has had on the community, and the potential impact it could have on Deaf and hard of hearing communities nationwide. It is this author's unmitigated hope that agencies on the state or federal level will recognize the dire need for this type of program that can potentially save the lives of Deaf and hard of hearing citizens. It is an avoidable loss. Because of the path paved by Vicki Bond's ERIC program, there is no longer any excuse for a life lost due to lack of communication. The impact of this program is unquantifiable.

About the Author

Cameo Hunsaker is an American Sign Language Interpreter and educator from Phoenix, AZ. She currently holds national certification from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and a state designation of the Emergency Response Interpreter Credential. She is currently pursuing her master's degree in Interpreting Studies from Western Oregon University.

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