

The Next Steps Project:

Expanding Interpreter Capacity in Healthcare and Workforce Development

ASL version of abstract available at: <https://healthcareinterpreting.org/next-steps-abstract>

The Next Steps Project is an initiative under the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) Absolute Priority Topic 2: Specialized Training and the Invitational Priority: Addressing Needs of Older Individuals. This project addresses the critical national shortage of certified sign language interpreters prepared for specialized contexts, a deficit limiting communication access, employment, and independence for deaf Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) consumers and professionals, particularly in healthcare and workforce development settings.

The primary goal is to maximize employment and community integration for deaf VR consumers by expanding the capacity of certified interpreters. Featuring a differentiated learning model centered on applied practice and supervised reflection, yearly programming includes an Orientation course, two facilitated Cohort Pathways (Healthcare Interpreting and Workforce Development), and flexible Self-Directed Learning (SDL) courses, training a total of over 10,500 interpreters during the project. Specialized content will explicitly address the unique communication needs of older deaf individuals and DeafBlind individuals. The project will pilot and integrate cutting-edge AI-enhanced tools, such as the Elya reflective coach and an AI-assessment tool to facilitate improved assignment preparation and skill development.

The quality and consistency of interpreting services will be strengthened by focusing on system-level capacity, including a robust plan for sustainability and scaling, training partner interpreter referral companies and postsecondary programs to implement the project's model with fidelity. This approach ensures that the project not only trains a high number of certified interpreters to meet VR consumer needs but also creates long-term, replicable solutions.