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When Access Professionals Become Safeguarding Risks: Interpreter Ethics, Community Trust, and Institutional Accountability in Deaf Services

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Interpreters hold extraordinary access to Deaf people's private lives. When an access professional becomes a safeguarding risk, who is accountable?

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Executive Summary

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Trust constitutes the foundational operating condition of accessibility services. Within Deaf communities, sign language interpreters routinely facilitate communication in healthcare, education, employment, legal proceedings, mental health services, domestic violence advocacy, and government programs. In these settings, interpreters obtain extraordinary access to confidential information, interpersonal relationships, and moments of profound personal vulnerability. Interpreter studies have long rejected the notion that interpreting is a purely neutral or mechanical process, instead recognizing interpreting as a situated professional practice requiring contextual judgment, ethical reasoning, and professional decision-making (Wadensjö, 1998; Metzger, 1999; Angelelli, 2004; Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2013). Consistent with this scholarship, the NAD-RID (National Association of the Deaf and Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf) Code of Professional Conduct identifies confidentiality, professional competence, ap-

propriate conduct, respect for consumers, ethical business practices, and continuing professional development as fundamental obligations of professional practice (National Association of the Deaf & Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2005).

When serious allegations concerning the conduct of accessibility professionals emerge, the implications extend well beyond the individual involved. Public administration and governance scholarship demonstrate that institutional legitimacy depends upon the ability of organizations to exercise authority through transparent, accountable, and ethically defensible administrative processes (Moore, 1995; Bovens, 2007; OECD, 2017). Within accessibility services, where communication access frequently intersects with civil rights, healthcare, education, judicial proceedings, and other functions affecting vulnerable populations, institutional responses to ethical concerns become matters of governance rather than personnel management alone. Accordingly, substantiated professional misconduct should be understood not merely as an individual ethical failure but as a governance event capable of influencing public trust across the broader accessibility ecosystem.

Substantiated professional misconduct should be understood not merely as an individual ethical failure but as a governance event.

This Special Report examines interpreter ethics through the interdisciplinary perspectives of interpreter studies, the sociology of professions, public administration, organizational governance, and qualitative case study research. Building upon scholarship concerning professional authority, institutional legitimacy, accountability, and organizational culture, the report argues that organizations responsible for language access should integrate ethical risk into governance systems with the same rigor applied to financial, operational, regulatory, and strategic risk (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Moore, 1995; Osborne, 2010; Schein & Schein, 2017). The report also introduces the Institutional Trust Transfer Model, an original conceptual framework proposing that trust placed in individual accessibility professionals extends across the institutions responsible for employing, credentialing, contracting, funding, regulating, and overseeing accessibility services.

The scope of this report is intentionally limited. It is not intended to adjudicate disputed allegations, determine criminal, civil, employment, or professional liability, or substitute for investigations conducted by employers, credentialing organizations, regulatory agencies, law enforcement, or courts. Rather, it applies established principles of qualitative case study methodology, documentary analysis, and public governance to examine broader questions of institutional accountability within accessibility services (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Where contemporary events are discussed, they are presented solely as case studies illustrating broader governance questions and should not be interpreted as findings of fact regarding any individual or organization. By maintaining this methodological distinction, the report contributes to scholarly discussions concerning professional ethics, institutional stewardship, organizational accountability, and the preservation of public trust within accessibility services.

1. Introduction

Trust Is the Infrastructure

Every profession depends upon public trust, but few require the degree of interpersonal trust demanded of sign language interpreters and other accessibility professionals serving Deaf communities. Unlike many service professions, interpreters routinely facilitate communication in healthcare, education, employment, legal proceedings, mental health services, domestic violence advocacy, child welfare, emergency response, and government programs. Interpreter studies have long rejected the notion that interpreting is merely the mechanical transfer of language, instead recognizing interpreting as a situated professional practice requiring contextual judgment, ethical reasoning, and continuous management of interpersonal interaction (Wadensjö, 1998; Metzger, 1999; Angelelli, 2004; Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2013). Consequently, interpreters are routinely entrusted with highly sensitive information, legally consequential interactions, and moments of profound personal vulnerability. The NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct reflects these responsibilities by identifying confidentiality, professional competence, appropriate conduct, respect for consumers, ethical business practices, and continuing professional development as fundamental obligations of professional practice (National Association of the Deaf & Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 2005).

This relationship differs in important respects from many other professions. Deaf communities within the United States are frequently characterized by overlapping educational, professional, and social networks in which consumers and interpreters may encounter one another repeatedly across multiple institutional settings. A single interpreter may facilitate communication for an individual's medical appointments, educational experiences, employment meetings, legal proceedings, community activities, and family interactions over many years. Although continuity may strengthen communication quality and cultural understanding, it also increases the importance of maintaining professional boundaries, managing actual and perceived conflicts of interest, and exercising contextually appropriate ethical judgment. Interpreter scholarship emphasizes that professional decision-making occurs within complex interpersonal environments in which ethical responsibilities extend beyond linguistic accuracy to include management of professional role, interpersonal relationships, and situational demands (Angelelli, 2004; Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2013; Metzger, 1999).

For this reason, professional trust should be understood not merely as an individual responsibility but as an institutional obligation. The sociology of professions argues that society grants professionals specialized authority because their expertise cannot be continuously evaluated by those they serve, creating a corresponding expectation of competence, ethical conduct, accountability, and professional self-regulation (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). Public administration similarly recognizes that institutional legitimacy depends upon organizations exercising authority through transparent, accountable, and ethically defensible governance processes that preserve public confidence and create public value (Moore, 1995; Bovens, 2007; OECD, 2017). Consumers must therefore have confidence not only that accessibility professionals will safeguard confidential information, avoid conflicts of interest, and exercise sound professional judgment, but also that employers, contracting agencies, educational institutions, healthcare systems, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies maintain governance structures capable of responding credibly when serious ethical concerns arise.

The implications extend well beyond the welfare of any individual consumer. Trust functions as essential infrastructure within accessibility systems because communication access depends upon consumers' willingness to disclose highly personal information and participate fully in public institutions. Research examining Deaf survivors of violence has consistently identified communication barriers, confidentiality concerns, and institutional trust as significant factors influencing whether individuals seek assis-

tance, disclose victimization, or engage with healthcare, victim services, and the justice system (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018; Urban Institute, 2022). These findings suggest that accessibility cannot be evaluated solely according to the availability of interpreter services. Institutions must also demonstrate that governance systems protect confidentiality, manage ethical risk, and respond appropriately when concerns regarding professional conduct arise.

This report proceeds from a straightforward premise: ethical conduct within accessibility professions is not solely a matter of individual professionalism but a matter of institutional governance. Organizations entrusted with providing language access bear corresponding responsibilities to establish systems of oversight, accountability, safeguarding, documentation, transparency, and ethical stewardship that protect both consumers and the integrity of the profession. Understanding trust as institutional infrastructure rather than merely an aspirational value provides the foundation for examining how allegations involving accessibility professionals, regardless of their ultimate disposition, may evolve into broader questions of organizational legitimacy, public accountability, and community trust (Moore, 1995; Osborne, 2010; OECD, 2017).

2. Why This Is a Public Governance Issue

Trust occupies a central position within both public administration and the sociology of professions because it explains how institutions acquire legitimacy and how professionals are granted authority over matters that cannot be continuously evaluated by those they serve. Public administration scholarship argues that institutional legitimacy derives not only from statutory authority or administrative efficiency, but also from an organization's capacity to create public value, exercise ethical stewardship, and remain accountable to the public (Moore, 1995; Bovens, 2007; OECD, 2017). The sociology of professions reaches a complementary conclusion. Professional authority is socially delegated because professions claim specialized expertise, yet that authority remains legitimate only when accompanied by competence, ethical conduct, and credible systems of professional accountability (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001).

Within this broader theoretical framework, sign language interpreters occupy a distinctive position among professional service providers. Unlike many professions whose responsibilities remain confined to a single institutional setting, interpreters routinely facilitate communication across healthcare, education, employment, judicial proceedings, mental health services, emergency response, child welfare, and govern-

ment programs. Interpreter studies consistently reject the conception of interpreters as neutral conduits, instead describing interpreting as a practice profession requiring contextual judgment, role management, ethical reasoning, and continuous decision-making within complex interpersonal environments (Wadensjö, 1998; Metzger, 1999; Angelelli, 2004; Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2013). The NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct reflects these responsibilities by identifying confidentiality, professional competence, appropriate conduct, respect for consumers, ethical business practices, and continuing professional development as core professional obligations (National Association of the Deaf & Registry of the Deaf, 2005).

Although interpreter studies and public administration have each generated substantial scholarly literature, relatively little scholarship has explicitly examined interpreter ethics through the integrated framework of institutional governance and public administration. Existing interpreter scholarship has primarily examined ethical reasoning, professional boundaries, discourse management, contextual demands, and decision-making within interpreted interactions (Wadensjö, 1998; Metzger, 1999; Angelelli, 2004; Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2013). Public administration scholarship, by contrast, has focused on accountability, institutional legitimacy, governance capacity, public value, and stewardship across public and nonprofit organizations (Moore, 1995; Bovens, 2007; Osborne, 2010; OECD, 2017). Bringing these two bodies of scholarship into dialogue provides an opportunity to examine how ethical concerns involving accessibility professionals may evolve into broader questions of institutional governance and public accountability.

This report advances that integration through the Institutional Trust Transfer Model, a conceptual framework proposing that public trust does not remain confined to the individual accessibility professional. Rather, trust extends across the interconnected institutions responsible for employing, credentialing, contracting, funding, regulating, and overseeing accessibility services. Consumers initially place trust in the individual interpreter, but that confidence subsequently extends to employers responsible for recruitment and supervision, credentialing organizations responsible for professional standards, contracting agencies responsible for service delivery, and ultimately the public institutions that rely upon accessibility services to fulfill legal, ethical, and civic responsibilities. This proposition builds upon established theories of professional legitimacy and institutional accountability while extending them to the governance of accessibility services (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Moore, 1995; Bovens, 2007).

Individual interpreter
Consumers initially place trust in the individual interpreter.

→ Employer

Employer
Trust extends to employers responsible for recruitment and supervision.

→ Credentialing body

Credentialing body
Credentialing organizations are responsible for professional standards.

→ Contracting agency

Contracting agency
Contracting agencies are responsible for service delivery.

→ Public institutions

Public institutions
Public institutions rely upon accessibility services to fulfill legal, ethical, and civic responsibilities.

Viewed through this framework, organizational responsibilities extend well beyond conventional personnel management. Institutions responsible for accessibility services should establish governance systems capable of identifying ethical risk, maintaining accessible complaint procedures, protecting good-faith reporting, documenting institutional decision-making, managing actual and perceived conflicts of interest, preserving procedural fairness, and demonstrating accountability to the communities they serve. Governance scholarship further suggests that public confidence is strengthened when institutions operate through transparent, reviewable, and ethically

defensible administrative processes capable of demonstrating integrity, consistency, and responsible stewardship (Bovens, 2007; Osborne, 2010; OECD, 2017). Accordingly, ethical governance requires organizations to manage institutional risk proactively rather than responding only after public confidence has been compromised.

These governance obligations assume particular importance within Deaf communities because accessibility services frequently operate within relatively small and socially interconnected networks where interpreters and consumers may encounter one another repeatedly across multiple institutional settings. Interpreter scholarship recognizes that recurring professional relationships heighten the importance of professional boundaries, role clarity, contextual judgment, and conflict management (Angelelli, 2004; Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2013). Research concerning Deaf survivors of violence likewise demonstrates that communication barriers, confidentiality concerns, familiarity with interpreters, and institutional trust may influence whether individuals seek assistance, disclose victimization, or engage with healthcare, victim services, and the justice system (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018; Urban Institute, 2022). These findings suggest that accessibility should not be evaluated solely according to whether communication services are available. Institutions must also ensure that reporting systems, complaint procedures, safeguarding mechanisms, and governance processes remain accessible, credible, and worthy of public confidence.

Accordingly, this report argues that allegations involving accessibility professionals should be understood as potential governance events rather than isolated employment disputes. Whether any individual allegation is ultimately substantiated remains the responsibility of appropriate investigative, administrative, regulatory, or judicial processes. The broader policy question concerns whether institutions have established governance systems capable of preserving public trust through transparency, accountability, ethical stewardship, procedural integrity, and organizational learning. By reframing interpreter ethics as an issue of institutional governance, the Institutional Trust Transfer Model provides a conceptual framework through which accessibility organizations, public agencies, policymakers, and researchers may evaluate ethical risk not solely as an individual concern, but as a matter affecting the legitimacy, resilience, and long-term sustainability of the accessibility ecosystem (Moore, 1995; Bovens, 2007; Osborne, 2010; OECD, 2017).

3. Ethical Expectations of Accessibility Professionals

The ethical expectations governing sign language interpreters are neither informal customs nor aspirational ideals. They are codified professional standards that establish the conditions under which Deaf consumers, hearing participants, employers, courts, educational institutions, healthcare systems, and public agencies may rely upon interpreters as accessibility professionals. The NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct identifies seven core areas of professional responsibility: confidentiality, professional skills and knowledge, appropriate conduct, respect for consumers, respect for colleagues, ethical business practices, and professional development (National Association of the Deaf & Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf [NAD-RID], 2005). Interpreter scholarship further recognizes that ethical practice cannot be reduced to mechanical rule compliance. Rather, professional ethics require continual contextual judgment, disciplined decision making, and accountability within complex communicative environments (Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2013). Collectively, these principles establish interpreting as a practice profession grounded in competence, ethical restraint, professional judgment, and consumer trust rather than a purely technical process of language transfer.

Confidentiality constitutes the profession's foundational ethical obligation because interpreters routinely facilitate communication involving healthcare, legal proceedings, education, employment, mental health services, domestic violence, child welfare, financial matters, and other settings where privacy is indispensable. The NAD-RID Code requires interpreters to protect confidential information acquired through professional practice (NAD-RID, 2005). Interpreter scholars likewise recognize confidentiality as fundamental to effective communication access because consumers must be able to communicate freely without fear that sensitive information will be disclosed or otherwise misused (Dean & Pollard, 2013). From a governance perspective, confidentiality establishes the institutional boundary separating communication access from inappropriate exposure. When consumers cannot trust that interpreted communication will remain confidential, they may become reluctant to disclose information, seek assistance, exercise legal rights, or participate fully in institutional processes.

Impartiality and professional role management are equally central to ethical interpreting practice. The NAD-RID Code requires interpreters to conduct themselves appropriately within each assignment while avoiding actual or perceived conflicts of interest (NAD-RID, 2005). This obligation should not be interpreted as requiring inter-

preters to function as passive conduits. Interpreter scholarship instead characterizes interpreting as a dynamic process requiring contextual reasoning, ethical judgment, discourse management, and disciplined role negotiation in response to linguistic, environmental, interpersonal, and intrapersonal demands (Dean & Pollard, 2001, 2013; Metzger, 1999; Wadensjö, 1998). Ethical impartiality therefore requires interpreters to facilitate communication without exploiting professional access to influence outcomes, advance personal interests, or compromise consumer autonomy.

Professional boundaries assume particular importance within Deaf communities because interpreters frequently encounter the same consumers across healthcare, education, employment, judicial proceedings, religious organizations, community activities, and social settings. These recurring interactions often enhance communication quality through linguistic familiarity and cultural competence, yet they may also increase the possibility of role confusion, perceived favoritism, confidentiality concerns, and conflicts of interest. Interpreter scholars generally recognize that effective boundary management depends upon continual contextual judgment rather than rigid application of universal rules because professional responsibilities vary according to the circumstances of each assignment (Angelelli, 2004; Dean & Pollard, 2013; Metzger, 1999). Accordingly, professional boundaries should be understood not merely as interpersonal expectations but as governance safeguards that protect consumer autonomy, professional neutrality, and institutional credibility.

The ethical prohibition against exploitation is best understood as a composite obligation arising from multiple professional responsibilities rather than as a single isolated ethical rule. Interpreters occupy positions of asymmetrical access in which they may acquire confidential information, observe institutional vulnerabilities, witness family or community conflict, and interact with individuals experiencing crisis, dependence, or constrained choice. The NAD-RID Code addresses these risks collectively through its expectations regarding confidentiality, appropriate conduct, respect for consumers, avoidance of conflicts of interest, and ethical business practices (NAD-RID, 2005). The Demand-Control Schema similarly emphasizes that interpreters must continually evaluate contextual demands and select responses that preserve consumer welfare, professional integrity, and ethical practice (Dean & Pollard, 2013). From a governance perspective, exploitation therefore encompasses not only financial misconduct but any misuse of professional access, confidential knowledge, institutional position, or community relationships that undermines consumer dignity, autonomy, safety, or trust.



Conflicts of interest likewise require careful institutional attention because they may be actual, potential, or reasonably perceived by consumers and other stakeholders. The relevant ethical question extends beyond whether an interpreter believes impartiality can be maintained. It also encompasses whether surrounding circumstances could reasonably diminish consumer confidence, compromise confidentiality, or weaken institutional credibility. Interpreter scholarship emphasizes that effective ethical practice requires recognition of contextual risks together with transparent and professionally accountable management of competing obligations (Dean & Pollard, 2013). Consequently, ethical governance extends beyond individual self-assessment to include conflict disclosure procedures, assignment screening, reassignment mechanisms where appropriate, opportunities for consumer input when feasible, and documentation demonstrating that conflicts have been identified and responsibly managed.

Accessibility professionals also bear responsibility for preserving public confidence in the profession itself. This responsibility arises not solely from interpreter ethics but also from the sociology of professions, which recognizes that society grants specialized practitioners substantial autonomy because their expertise cannot be continuously evaluated by those they serve (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). Professional legitimacy therefore depends upon a profession's continuing ability to regulate conduct through credible ethical standards and accountable systems of professional self-governance. Interpreters exercise this delegated authority in settings where consumers, employers, healthcare providers, educational institutions

TIPS

Know something about a sign language AI system that the public should know? Send it to tips@novaracg.com. Every tip is read by me and kept confidential. If you work in the UK, writing to us is not by itself a protected disclosure under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, so before you share employer information, check your options with Protect (protect-advice.org.uk), the free whistleblowing advice line.

How to cite

Grizzle, H. M. (2026, June 27). When Access Professionals Become Safeguarding Risks: Interpreter Ethics, Community Trust, and Institutional Accountability in Deaf Services. Novara Consulting Group. https://www.novaracg.com/2026/06/27/when-access-professionals-become-safeguarding-risks-interpreter-ethics-community-trust-and-institutional-accountability-in-deaf-services/