

Interpreters provided for deaf at all Eugene public meetings

By Catherine Hawley
Emerald Reporter

Eugene is way ahead of the game in providing interpreters for the hearing impaired at public meetings and events, according to city and school district officials.

Lane County public bodies had been providing interpreters long before a state law went into effect in October. The law, passed by the last Legislative session, requires public bodies to provide interpreters for the hearing impaired at meetings, if requested in advance.

Eugene has been providing interpreters for the hearing impaired an average of once or twice a month for about two years, said Linda Collins, southern regional coordinator for the Oregon Disability Commission's Deaf and Hearing Impaired Access Program.

Collins arranges interpreter services for public meetings in Eugene as part of a long-standing relationship with the city.

"I'm really proud of Eugene," Collins said. "They've really got the march on this."

Collins estimated 200 to 300 deaf or hearing impaired people live in the Eugene-Springfield area.

The city has responded to all requests for sign language interpreters at public meetings, Collins said.

Eugene is also doing well providing interpreters at civic events, such as the groundbreaking ceremony for a park for people with disabilities and the annual Martin Luther King Jr. speech at the Hult Center, Collins said.

In addition, the city arranges for an interpreter at meetings of the Human Rights Task Force for a member who is deaf, Collins said.

"It's not that new for Eugene," Collins said of the requirement, which is now part of the state's public meetings law. "We've only had one or two more requests than usual since the law has gone into effect."

The hearing impaired have a right to interpreter services regardless of whether they are required by law, said Jim Volkman, chair of the Cascade Regional Program for the Hearing Impaired, which serves about 80 school children in Lane County.

Volkman, who also coordinates interpreter services for the hearing impaired when the school district receives a request from the public, said he had not paid much attention to the passage of the new requirement and that it had not affect-

ed his office workload much.

A more pressing matter for Volkman is maintaining a pool of interpreters, he said.

Collins said it is sometimes difficult to find interpreters available for daytime meetings.

"Eugene and Springfield are not big enough to have a bank of interpreters," Volkman said.

Interpreters for the hearing impaired are now considered "classified staff," along with custodians, secretaries and teacher's aides, Volkman said. And when the school district looks for ways to tighten its budget, classified employees are often the first to be cut.

Another problem is that there is no local program for deaf education or sign language training program. The University has cut back its sign language program, Volkman said.

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