

# BUILDINGS SAFETY JOURNAL

## Sign language is about seeing the voices, rather than hearing them

*Requirements for sign language interpreter's stations in 2017 ICC A117.1*

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TECHNICAL TOPICS

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People need to be able to communicate effectively for a variety of reasons. We use communication to share information, ask questions, express wants and needs, develop social relationships, and more. Many entities have obligations under civil rights laws to ensure effective communication with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. For example, television and movies provide closed captioning as an accommodation.

Something new to the 2017 edition of accessibility standard – [ICC A117.1, Accessible and Useable Buildings and Facilities](#) – are sign language interpreters stations. While not required by the [International Building Code](#) (IBC), the technical criteria in ICC A117.1 can be used as guidance for someone who wants to provide this option. So why choose to provide sign language interpreters instead of closed captioning? One reason might be that there is not a screen to display the captioning; but, there are other reasons as well.

Many people enjoy having the opportunity to see live theater. When you see a performance, not only what the actors say but how they say it – tones, inflection, emphasis – puts life into the performance. Sign language is a visual language that uses gestures and handshapes to represent concepts or ideas. For example, performers may ask a question by raising the pitch of their voices and by adjusting word order; while [American Sign Language](#) users ask a question by raising their eyebrows, widening their eyes and tilting their bodies forward. A person using sign language uses more than just their hands. Seeing the whole face, especially the eyes and mouth, is crucial in being able to distinguish between similar-looking signs. Captioning does not provide that extra level of communication.

The sign language interpreter's station requirement (ICC A117.1 Section 802.11) includes technical criteria for the space where an interpreter needs to stand or sit, and the locations of seats in the performance venue where the audience should be able to sit to view the interpreter.

The International Building Code does include some provisions to assist communication with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Some examples are visible alarms (Section 907.5.2.3.2), assisted listening devices (Section 1109.2.7), captioning (Section 1109.2.7.3), variable message signage (Section 1112.5), classroom acoustics (Section 1207), two-way communication in elevator lobbies or areas of refuge (Section 1009.8), and within elevator cabs (Section 3001.2). These section references are from the 2021 edition. The 2021 IBC referenced the 2017 ICC A117.1, Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities for many of the technical (how-to) requirements.

The interpreter needs a place to stand at the front of the room, preferably close to the same level as the person speaking or the action of the performance so that someone in the audience can watch both. The space for standing should be at least 24 inches deep and 36 inches wide. Providing a large area around that location is desirable. Since sign language interpreters need to switch out often, a dedicated location might also allow space for a chair over to the side for the off-duty interpreter to rest and wait.

It is not the intent of these provisions to require seating within the entire segment specified by the 60-degree angle in both directions; that would force the interpreter station to the center of the stage. Typically, the interpreter is off to one side of the podium or stage. Seats within 60 degrees left or right of the interpreter's location will have the best line of sight to see the interpreter. There are no special requirements for the seats, but those seats within this viewing angle would be where someone who needed the service of the sign language interpreter would need to sit. This information is important for ticket sellers who need to be able to accommodate

a request from someone who needs to see an interpreter. Being too far to the side would not allow for an adequate view of the interpreter.

Viewers also need to be able to see the interpreter from their waist to the top of their head. A sightline to allow for a “viewing window” from 3 feet to 6 feet (915 mm to 1830 mm) above the location where the interpreter is standing. This will allow people in some of the closer seats to be able to see the interpreter sign, even though they cannot see the interpreter’s feet.

Adequate lighting (10 footcandles at 48 inches above the floor where the interpreter stands) is needed for the audience to see the interpreter. This is especially important if the interpreter is off to the side in a darkened theater. In addition to the level of lighting, best practice would be to limit the shadows cast by that light; a spot light from the front would be better than a down light from the ceiling. Many interpreters use facial expressions in addition to the signs to indicate the emotion of what is being said.

A patterned background or a brightly colored background would be a distraction for persons viewing an interpreter. If there is a wall within 10 feet of the interpreter location, that wall should not have a pattern, texture or be a shiny surface to a height of at least 10 feet. The extra height is in consideration of people in the front rows having an angle that looks more up at the interpreter than straight on. The optimum color is “French blue”; a non-distracting color that works for any skin tone that the interpreter might have. There is an exception that allows for someone to put up a moveable backdrop so the facility would not have to change the finish or decoration on the wall.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Paarlberg is a senior staff architect in Technical Services with the International Code Council. Her experience with the Code Council includes work in the code development department and training. Paarlberg serves as code development secretary for the IBC General and Means of Egress/Accessibility and the IRC Building. She is the Code Council representative for development of the referenced technical standard for accessibility, ICC A117.1 “Accessible and Usable Buildings and Facilities.” Paarlberg writes interpretations, commentaries and articles about a wide variety of accessibility issues.

