

Greater Los Angeles Council on Deafness Case Study

Breaking down the sounds of silence

The Greater Los Angeles Council on Deafness (GLAD) establishes a statewide network of Polycom's ViewStation™ video systems to help deaf and hard of hearing people overcome their daily struggle to communicate easily and effectively.

“We installed Polycom's video equipment in hospitals, police stations and Social Security offices,” says Daniel Har. “We provided Remote Video Interpreting (RVI) services from GLAD headquarters in Los Angeles and from seven regional outreach offices around California. It didn't take long to prove that RVI increases the availability of interpreting services. It also saves time and money because there are fewer hourly fees to pay.”

One of the greatest challenges faced every day by people who are deaf and hard of hearing, is one that most people take for granted: being able to easily and effectively communicate. That's why Daniel Har, operations manager of the Greater Los Angeles Council for Deafness (GLAD) is dedicated to helping the deaf and hard of hearing communicate and gain greater access to information. He's proving that interactive video technology can significantly improve communications for greater access to services, closer family relations, and overall improved quality of life.

Har was hired by the Technical Opportunity Program under the U.S. Department of Commerce to assess technologies that can help deaf people gain greater access to community and governmental services. As a key part of his responsibilities, he conducted a thorough evaluation of interactive video communications for remote interpreting.

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Without the system, interpreters typically drive an hour or two for a face-to-face session. Because they charge by the hour, fees can add up quickly. Roundtrip travel can easily add three or four hours to a 15-minute meeting.

“It’s much easier to find an interpreter for a brief session that doesn’t require a long commute, especially for emergencies and unexpected events,” says Har. “Sometimes a deaf person will show up at a Social Security office without an appointment. They’ll call for an interpreter, but it often takes so long for them to arrive that the deaf person leaves without being helped. When the Social Security office is part of the video communications network, deaf clients can have immediate access to an interpreter. Then they can communicate without barriers.”

The first language of many deaf people in the U.S. is American Sign Language. English is often their second, and the two don’t always have word-for-word translations. The languages differ in grammar and structure, too. And, English reading and writing skills of the deaf are often found lacking. So without an interpreter, writing back and forth easily leads to misunderstandings.

Sergeant Deborah Gourman of the Northeast Area Los Angeles Police Department called upon GLAD to help with a recent criminal investigation. A hearing impaired person was able to sign with an interpreter through Polycom’s ViewStation(tm) video system. At the same time, the interpreter translated in English to Sgt. Gourman.

“Remote Video Interpreting made our communications so smooth,” says Sergeant Gourman. “Normally we rely on neighbors or friends or exchanging written notes, but there is never a guarantee of understanding. With this technology, it was as good as having the interpreter right there with us. I believe that Remote Video Interpreting through interactive video communications can accelerate the reporting process and possibly save lives.”

Captain Kyle Jackson, also with the Northeast Area Los Angeles Police Department, welcomes the new video communications technology. He feels that it’s an invaluable tool that can assist his department in fulfilling its obligation to maintain accuracy in the reporting and investigating of crimes. “Crime is dynamic,” says Capt. Jackson. “There’s no time for a slow system. The system we’ve had is so tedious that communications almost always break down. The deaf are often reluctant to make reports or discuss ideas because it’s so difficult to communicate through note-writing or typing through the Telephone Relay Service. We need to see their faces and pain and frustrations. Video communications and remote interpreting let us do that.”

Most deaf and hearing-impaired people rely on nationwide telephone relay services that enable them to make and receive phone calls. Here’s how it works: Using a Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD), a small electronic device with a keyboard, LED display and printer, one deaf person calls another, communicating by typing messages back and forth. If the call is placed between a deaf person with a TDD and a hearing person without a TDD, the user calls a relay service provided by telephone companies. The user gives the name and number of the person to be called to a hearing operator who places the call on a second telephone line. While both parties are on their respective

lines, the operator interprets. The deaf person types a message. The operator receives the text and then interprets and recites the message to the hearing person. The operator hears the reply and types it back to the deaf person.

While the service has been invaluable in making the telephone accessible to the deaf and hearing impaired, it has its limitations. It's slow and impersonal, and successful communications rely too heavily on the deaf users' reading and writing skills.

"The Telephone Relay Service is helpful but it doesn't solve all remote communication problems," says Har. "Some deaf people can't communicate with hearing people. If they're talking to a doctor or a lawyer, for example, the English conversation can get rather complicated and technical. The deaf person might not understand what is being said."

Another limitation is that the Telephone Rely Service can't transmit emotions, so personal conversations tend to be brief.

"Instead of using a TDD, imagine using a video camera and a computer screen," says Har. "The entire family can get involved and they can wave to each other and show their excitement. They could show their new baby to the grandmother. If they're signing, they can show their emotions. Many deaf people say they want that."

Mr. Har evaluated several video communications systems before deciding on Polycom. Picture clarity and 30 frames per second transmission of images are critical features for signing.

"Hearing people don't move as much as deaf people," says Har. "Signing requires quick hand movements so we need full-motion video. Signing wouldn't work with jerky images because too much would be missed. When you sign, you rely heavily on facial expressions and body language to communicate meaning and emotions. That's why we need a high-bandwidth, state-of-the-art system." GLAD's network runs over T-1 and ISDN high-speed connections. Har is evaluating the potential of using high-speed connections over the Internet for reduced costs and broader access. As part of his evaluation, he's optimistic that deaf and hard-of-hearing communities can greatly benefit from both Polycom's ViewStation system for small and large rooms, and from Polycom's new ViaVideo™ unit. ViaVideo, recently introduced by Polycom, is the world's first integrated desktop video communications device that delivers business-quality, interactive video and audio from a desktop or laptop PC with a broadband connection. Available for only US \$500, it works by plugging into a PC through the universal serial bus (USB) port.

"I like the fact that Polycom's video communication systems run over Internet Protocol (IP) networks," says Har. "We're very excited about the potential of having low-cost, high-quality devices like

Polycom's ViaVideo in every deaf person's home."