

Finnish Law on Interpreting Services for Persons with Disabilities

During this spring of 2010, the Finnish Parliament is discussing the new legislative proposal for Interpreting Services for the persons with disabilities (i.e. Deaf, Deafblind, hard of hearing and deafened persons, and persons with severe speech disorder). The proposed law is a globally unique one: it might be the first stand-alone, full law in the world which is specifically dedicated to providing and ensuring interpreting Services for these afore mentioned groups.

Previously, the interpreting services were covered by only one paragraph in the Finnish Disability Act and have been funded by local municipalities since the late 1970s up until now. The clients were granted interpreting services approximately 120-180 hours/year free of charge. At the moment, this service is being transferred to the shoulders of the State. The new “home” of these services is Kela - The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, which will be acquiring the services by sub-contracts from the service providers (i.e. mainly private interpreting agencies). In addition, there will be five regional booking centres. The service is free of charge for the Deaf and others who have the right to use it (i.e. who have applied for this service and were granted it from their municipality, and in future from Kela).

This law has yet to be adopted, and it is to enter into force 1st September 2010. The law clearly states that Kela has the responsibility to provide adequate and sufficient interpreting services for those groups mentioned earlier, in order to enhance and secure their linguistic, social, political, economical and cultural rights. This will ensure an equal footing with other citizens for the Deaf and for the other groups.

During the drafting of this legislative proposal the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health consulted respective organizations (Finnish Association of the Deaf, The Finnish Federation of Hard of Hearing, The Finnish Deafblind Association, and the Finnish Association of Sign Language Interpreters), as well as both of the Universities of Applied Sciences which are the units responsible for implementing the Sign Language interpreter training programme (240 credits). One of the criteria set by Kela/SIIF for service providers is that the interpreters must be trained and registered professionals. The question of the register is yet to be solved (hopefully) within the near future, as the present register is not serving its purpose well any longer.

The main characteristics of the law are that it ensures a minimum of 180 hours of interpreting per year for the Deaf, the hard of hearing and the deafened, and a minimum of 360 hours of interpreting per year for the Deafblind. Although the law pronounces minimum level of the service provision - which all the respective organizations would have been glad to have seen removed, and simply stated the right to the interpreting services at the extent of individual needs - it also articulates that additional hours can be applied for and granted when needed. The right to use interpreting services also covers travelling abroad for business, pleasure or studies etc. as part of everyday life.

Educational interpreting needs to be applied for separately. On this matter the law states that educational interpreting has to be provided to the extent needed for the person to be

able to finish his/her studies within the (time) frame defined in curriculum. These hours will not be included in the community interpreting hours.

The law emphasizes the individual needs of the client regarding the kind of interpreting s/he needs, thus focusing on the client's needs and not those of the service providers. The service providers need to take into consideration the wishes of the client regarding whom to use as interpreter, what kind of interpreting s/he requires, etc. One aspect in the law is also remote interpreting. The new law obliges Kela/SIIF to provide all the customers the necessary equipments, programmes, and cover the internet connection costs etc. needed to use this service mode.

In short, the aim is to enhance the standard and quality of interpreting services, and ensure high quality and equal access to the service to all clients, regardless of their communicational needs or in which part of the country they happen to live. This is also in line with what will be expected from the government of Finland when it ratifies the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Source: Finnish Association of the Deaf