



No So **A Brief History of the Project**

Neil Glickman said of Alabama's mental health interpreters that, "[T]he sophistication of these interpreters in mental health not only meets the level of best practice, it establishes it." This is high praise from one of the world's leading experts in mental health and deafness. It is not mere chance that Alabama is home to a program that garners such praise. It is the result of years of planning and work that has gone into building a stellar mental health interpreting program.

Alabama's *Mental Health Interpreter Training* project has been a quarter of a century in the making. It started as a "what if" rhetorical question that Steve Hamerdinger, then director of the now defunct Bureau of Deaf Services at the Missouri Department of Mental Health, asked at a staff meeting in 1995. To Wayne Elrod and Jay Wolfe it wasn't rhetorical; it was a practical and realistic question. Elrod, who was a staff interpreter Deaf Services and Wolfe, who was with the Missouri Commission for the Deaf, took the idea and developed a one day training that became the forerunner of today's MHIT. That early effort established some characteristics that have become hallmarks of MHIT. There was considerable focus, even back then, on knowledge vs. signing skill, *per se*. The underlying principle then, as now, was that interpreters working in mental health settings had to be very competent general interpreters before they approach a highly specialized area like mental health. MHIT would never be about "how do you sign..." It would be about helping interpreters broaden their knowledge of mental illness and treatment so that they would be able to make more effective interpretations.

After that first event, workshops were held more or less annually; sometimes a one-day affair but occasionally longer. By 2000, it was clear that the training was losing focus. The *Mental Health Interpreting Research Project* leadership team, now consisting of Kelley Clark, Ben Karlin and Steve Hamerdinger, began talking about developing some kind of standard on which to ground the training. "We were doing it 'bass-akwards' in that we had the training before we had the standards," said Hamerdinger. Around this time a number of initiatives related to medical interpreting had sprung up around the country as a consequence of [Executive Order 13166](#). While not focused on sign language interpreting *per se*, there were common elements which were very applicable to mental health interpreting with deaf people. "Efforts in Washington State at codifying 'qualified' interpreting in medical settings got us to thinking about what we could do in the mental health field in Missouri," Hamerdinger explained.

The MHIRP team decided to draft standards for mental health interpreting with deaf people. Locking themselves in a room over two days, they hammered out a draft for what they called "[*Minimum Competencies for Interpreters in Mental Health Settings*](#)." As common-sensical as those early standards seem now, they were considered radical at the time. The effort was met with decidedly mixed reactions. On one hand, it was considered groundbreaking by consumer advocacy

groups. On the other, it was viewed with disdain and derision by some provider groups. Mental health providers feared that the standards would raise the cost of interpreters. Interpreters, especially at that moment in time in Missouri, were skeptical of any attempt to “regulate their business.” Opposition from various quarters led to shelving the project in the fall of 2002.

When Hamerdinger moved to Alabama at the beginning of 2003 to set up the Office of Deaf Services there, he brought with him the idea of defining what a *Qualified Mental Health Interpreter* was. He was soon joined by Charlene Crump and they proved to be “simpatico.” Crump, who at the time was chair of the Alabama Licensure Board for Interpreters and Transliterators, was intrigued by the idea of codifying mental health interpreting standards. They approached the Director of Policy and Planning at the Alabama Department of Mental Health, Ann Evans, who had a background in deafness, and were enthusiastically encouraged to draft proposed rules.

Determined not to run aground on the same rocks that sunk the effort in Missouri, Hamerdinger and Crump began a series of meetings with various stakeholder groups in hopes of enlisting support for the standards. They were encouraged when both the Alabama Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and the Alabama Licensure Board for Interpreters and Transliterators got behind the concept. The Alabama Association of the Deaf and the Department of Mental Health were also firmly behind the effort. Using “*Minimum Competencies for Interpreters in Mental Health Settings*” as a starting point, Hamerdinger and Crump drafted a working document for feedback from stakeholders. They encountered very little opposition, much to Hamerdinger’s surprise. “I had grown accustomed to the interpreter community resisting any effort define quality in interpreting. I didn’t expect interpreters here to be so receptive.”

Developed through the spring and summer of 2003, the new standards, [section 580-3-24 of the Administrative Code of Alabama](#), were entered into the Administrative Code of Alabama in December, 2003. This became the basis for the curriculum of the Interpreter Institute.

The first *Interpreter Institute* was held over two weekends in September, 2003. The Institute met in Montgomery September 5th – 7th and in Tuscaloosa September 12th – 14th. It was attended by 18 interpreters from around Alabama. The split format allowed for having the training physically inside various facilities where deaf consumers lived. This exposed the interpreters to real-life situations and helped sensitize them how severely freedom is often restricted at in-patient facilities. Robert Pollard, Roger Williams and Steve Hamerdinger were the first to join what would become the core faculty and they have been with MHIT since the beginning.

In 2004, the *Interpreter Institute* again utilized the two 3-day session approach, but moved Thursday-Friday-Saturday set. Running August 12th – 14th and 19th – 21st, the training was still split between Montgomery and Tuscaloosa. The class grew to 33 participants and the first group of interpreters from 2003 began to complete the requirements for their *Qualified Mental Health Interpreter (QMHI)*

certification. Robyn Dean was added to the core faculty that year. Additionally, interpreters from surrounding states began to notice the work being done here and wanted to join the Institute. Many of them were already licensed to practice in Alabama. However, the Project Leadership received a lot of criticism about the split schedule.

Based on this feedback, the 2005 Interpreter Institute went to a five-day straight through schedule. Running August 8th – 12th, this change made it necessary to keep the *Institute* in one place. The change also required tightening the curriculum and taking out non-essential classes. The popular “Hearing Voices” activity, conducted by Kathy Seifried, was added that year, as 29 participants attended the Institute. That year also marked the first time a special break out session was used for deaf interpreters.

The 2006 *Interpreter Institute* ran September 12th – 17th with 50 participants. There was an unusually large contingent of deaf interpreters that year and an experiment with trying to give deaf participants exposure to some typed of simulated hallucinatory experience was tried. While interesting, it proved not as effective as the *Hearing Voices* activity. Brian McKenny joined the core faculty that year. Roger Williams was seriously ill and Steve Hardy-Braz was brought in to help out.

Running June 4th – June 8th, the 2007 *Interpreter Institute* shattered previous attendance records, both for number of first time attendees and total number of participants. Wisconsin Department of Mental Health sent a delegation, several members of which completed the entire cycle and become *QMHI*s. Wisconsin was the first state to unofficially adopt Alabama’s standards. That year, Alabama also ran an experimental *Advanced Institute*, affectionately called MHIT II, which drew 41 participants, all of whom had previously attended the basic *Institute*.

In 2008 the *Interpreter Institute* was held at Troy University at Montgomery, running August 25th – 29th. Another capacity crowd, average experience level was higher than previous groups. This class had a number of clinicians in it as well.

The 2009 edition of the Interpreter Institute marked a major departure from previous editions. Severe reductions in ODS operating funds threatened to forestall that year's training. It was rescued by a juxtaposition of timing and need. Georgia had grant money they had to spend by July 1st of that year and ODS had its training dollars zeroed out. Thanks to a fortuitously timed visit to the Bailey Deaf Unit, Charley Bliss and Steve Hamerdinger agreed to have the *Institute* in Georgia as a joint project. With only 90 days to arrange, promote and plan the institute, it was held in Atlanta June 1 – 5. It was attended by 18 participants from six states, and was a joint project of The Alabama Department of Mental Health, Office of Deaf Services, the Georgia Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities & Addictive Diseases, the Georgia State Financing & Investment Commission – State ADA Coordinator’s Office, the Georgia Department of Human Resources Limited English Proficient/Sensory Impaired Program, and the Georgia Department of Labor, Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

The event was pulled off, but not without many problems. It also conflicted with several other events in GA and the short lead time severely reduced out of state interest in the Institute. This training convinced ODS of the need to make the Institute self-sustaining and prompted many of the changes that come in the years after.

The eighth annual *Institute* was held July 26 – 30, 2010, at Troy University at Montgomery. ADARA joined the effort as a partner. A total 72 people from 26 states participated this year as trainees, faculty or staff. The Institute returned its nationally respected faculty, many for the seventh or eighth time. Robert Pollard, Robyn Dean, and Roger Williams headlined a group of trainers who are in national and international demand as experts in mental health interpreting. They were joined by veterans Steve Hamerdinger, Charlene Crump, Brian McKenny, Shannon Reese, Carter English, and Kathy Seifried.

That year several new courses were introduced, including early mornings and lunch time features. The "Early Bird Specials" and the "Brown Bag Lunches" gave participants an opportunity to explore areas not covered in the main sessions. In addition, that year marked a new series for alumni only. This panel, which was lead by ODS Director Hamerdinger and featured Eric Hedberg, MD, Clay Shealy, Ph.D., and Daphne Kendrick, LCSW. Each panel member talked about how they used interpreters and what they needed from interpreters through the prism of their clinical disciplines.

The ninth annual *Interpreter Institute* was conducted August 22 – 26, 2011, again on the campus of Troy University at Montgomery, and drew 83 participants (not including faculty and staff) from 29 states. That year's class set numerous records. In addition to being the largest class up to that time, from the most states ever, it was also the largest class of deaf participants (13). The median experience level was also the highest ever; at close to 10 years experience each before attending the training. There were 32 formal sessions and 8 poster sessions over 44.5 actual clock hours of instruction. All 14 members of the faculty were veterans of at least one previous Institute.

In 2012, the project celebrated the 10th Institute, running August 6 – 10. It was attended by 80 registered participants from 25 different states. This year was the first time that individuals from other countries officially attended the conference and it has generated much interest in replicating Alabama's mental health interpreter standards back home. Australia, Canada and Japan were directly represented in this year's cohort, and the Ukraine was indirectly represented. So many people applied and were turned down that a 35-person wait list was created for the 2013 edition of the Institute.

There were 32 different workshops with 43 actual clock hours of instruction. The faculty was almost entirely veterans of the Institute. Robert Pollard and Steve Hamerdinger had presented at all of the ten annual Institutes. Other long time veterans included Charlene Crump, Robyn Dean, and Roger Williams, each with nine

appearances. Carter English, Shannon Reese and Brian McKenny also returned from previous Institutes.

The 2013 institute had 80 registered participants and yet another waiting list for the 2014 cohort. Running August 5 – 9, it drew people from 27. There were nine D/HH individuals and ten alumni, including three individuals who are also certified as *Qualified Mental Health Interpreters*. It also was special because it was opened by Department of Mental Health Commissioner James Reddoch, the first sitting Commissioner to open the annual Institute. That's cool. But what's more cool is that he is a former member of the Institute faculty, having taught forensic mental health the first two years. That means he is the first (and likely the only) MHIT faculty member to ever become a state commissioner for mental health.

The 12th cohort convened August 4 – 8, 2014 with had 85 registered participants (beyond our usual capacity) and another extensive waiting list. Thirty states, England and Denmark were represented, with 11 Deaf/HH individuals and eight alumni. Through partnership, ten individuals attended on the Georgia DBHDD scholarship and four from Kentucky DMH scholarship. An early morning session titled “Diversify Your Life!” was added to complement the Self Care course. This year marked the addition of a representative from CIT and a new faculty member, Carole Lazorisak, to the program.

The 13th annual institute was the largest up to that time, with 93 participants and another year with an extensive waiting list. Running August 3-7, 2015, 24 states were represented with nine Deaf/HH individuals and six alumni, including four individuals who are also certified as Qualified Mental Health Interpreters. Commissioner James Perdue continued the tradition begun by former Commissioner Reddoch, of opening MHIT. Through various partnerships, ten individuals were here on a scholarship from Minnesota Dept. of Human Services, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Division, ten from Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities and four from Kentucky Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, Division of Behavioral Health. That year marked the addition of several alumni sessions offered throughout the week including perspectives from hearing clinicians; perspectives from deaf clinicians; supervision interventions through case analysis; abuse/violence within the deaf community; active shooter scenario, partnerships between hearing and deaf interpreters working in mental health – perspective of a CDI; and ethical discourse and moral reasoning patterns. A session on Communication Assessments was added to the core curriculum to help introduce participants to emerging best practice.

The 14th annual Interpreter Institute of the Alabama Mental Health Interpreter Training Project ran July 24 – 29, 2016, in Montgomery Alabama. Altogether, 127 people attended, either as participants or faculty/staff, including 20 presenters.

This year, several new things were introduced, including a non-certification track for alumni who wanted to gain new knowledge. With 21 attendees, there were 14 classes in this track.

The main track, which is the core of the annual training, was attended by 88 participants, of whom 12 were previous attendees. These participants represented 27 states and Scotland. Four states sponsored delegations: Georgia, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. There were 22 full-length classes in this track and 13 mini-classes, called early bird or brown bag sessions.

As with the past several institutes, that year's class was maxed out in April and a lengthy waiting list was established. In fact, demand for admission for the 2017 class is such that the first request for the dates was received by the staff in July, while the Institute was still in session!

2017 marked the 15th year of MHIT. Another full house, the class maxed out within six weeks of being posted. There were 90 registered participants in the Core Track. An alumni track was offered again this year and there were 47 participants in that. All together there were 165 people including faculty and staff participating in MHIT this year. Of particular interest were the 10 fully certified deaf participants. Even the early bird and brown bag sessions were so full that we had to split them and run two at a time. The number of student workers also increased from four to six. As in the past several years a waiting list was established. This time the waiting list had almost as many people as the Institute itself.

Nearly 175 people from around the country descended on Montgomery, AL July 30th for the week-long 16th annual Mental Health Interpreter Training Institute, held Troy University – Montgomery Campus. Attendees represented 29 states and Canada.

This year, for the third straight year, there were two tracks, one for “first-time” participants, and one for alumni of previous Institutes who wanted to come back to gain further knowledge. The “Core”, which is the main Institute had 91 registered participants, while the Alumni Track had 43. Staff and faculty rounded out the crowd.

As the class size expanded, so did the offerings. This year, 54 different workshops were offered in the core, with a total of 45.25 clock hours of training possible. The core faculty included long-time members like Robert Pollard and Steve Hamerdinger, who have taught in all 16 Institutes. Other long-time members included Robyn Dean, Roger Williams, Charlene Crump, Carter English, and Brian McKenny. They were joined by newcomers Kent Schafer and Amanda Somdal.

The 17th Annual Interpreter Institute of the Mental Health Interpreter Training Project kicked off August 5, 2019 with a welcome from Associate Commissioner for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, Diane Baugher. She addressed a full house crowd of 134 participants, staff and volunteers in the Core session. Baugher, who has announced her intention to retire at the end of December, was joined by her designated successor, Dr. Tammie McCurry. Both praised the Institute as a national benchmark and a source of pride for Alabama.

There were 94 registered participants in the Core Track, another sold out program. They represented 34 states and Canada. Another 49 participants were registered in

the Alumni Track, which is open only to people who have attended previous Institutes. Altogether, 38 states and Canada were represented among the participants of the combined tracks. This year's group was also highly educated with 38 people holding advanced degrees, including two Ph.D.

In all, 57 different workshops were offered allowing for participants to earn up to 43.25 clock hours of training. Continuing education units were offered for interpreters, counselors, rehabilitation counselors and social workers, increasing the appeal of MHIT to non-traditional audiences. MHIT focuses not just on training interpreter but also training clinicians on working with interpreters.

This was the fourth year that the Alumni Track was offered, with attendance growing each year. Registration for alumni who were certified as Qualified Mental Health Interpreters was a nominal \$50 for more than 40 contact hours of training. This year, Mental Health First Aid was offered for the first time, enabling attendees to take home a functional certification as a Mental Health First Aider. It was well received. Plans are being made to add options next year, such as First Aid, CPR, and perhaps others.

Since the first *Interpreter Institute*, over 1,000 unique people have been trained, an average of 67 new people every year, with many have attended more than one Institute. We have had 17 different faculty members over the years with Dean, Pollard, Williams, Hamerdinger, and Crump the longest serving core faculty members.