

UW-Madison: Interpreter at UW health highlights the importance of American sign language for deaf patients

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MADISON, Wis. – In honor of Deaf Awareness Month, Kim Barr, ASL interpreter, UW Health, is offering some insights on how the health system and the community can support people who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing or Deaf Blind.

When a health care provider and a patient do not speak the same language, having health information available in the patient's preferred language is critical to the patient's health, recovery, treatment and wellness. With a commitment to prioritize in-person interpreters, Barr thinks what UW Health is able to do for Deaf patients is remarkable. In total, interpreters are part of more than 3,500 appointments per year.

UW Health interpreters are nationally certified medical interpreters and provide interpretation in person, something Barr says is important given that ASL is a highly expressive language. They use video as a back-up when in-person interpreters are not available.

“We as interpreters are trusted members of the health care team,” said Barr. “We serve as a bridge between patients and providers to ensure clear and accurate communication.”

These practices are a far cry from Barr's experience as a child of Deaf parents.

“At doctor's appointments, my mom and dad wrote notes back and forth or they

would bring me with them to try to relay things I didn't really understand," she said.

Barr credits the Americans with Disabilities Act for the accessibility improvements that have been made over the last 30 years and she is proud of UW Health for going above and beyond for Deaf, Hard of Hearing or Deaf Blind patients.

Barr still believes there is an opportunity to improve equity for the Deaf community. The pandemic has created unique challenges for those who cannot hear or cannot hear well, such as masks blocking facial expressions and preventing lip reading.

"It's about meeting people where they are and understanding what they need," she said. "This Deaf Awareness Month, I encourage people to take that awareness to heart and seek out Deaf perspectives to better understand this inspiring community."

A pre-recorded interview and video of Barr signing are available.