

From representation to rights

A practical guide for national associations
of sign language interpreters



European Forum of
Sign Language Interpreters

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This guide offers NASLIs concrete, graduated strategies — from first steps to full professional representation — grounded in research and adapted to real organisational capacity.

VISUAL OVERVIEW

Infographics

The infographics below summarise key data on representation and the European legal framework for sign language interpreters. They are designed for social media (Instagram square format).

Infographic 1 — The representation gap

Distribution of efsli member associations and sign language interpreters across Europe.

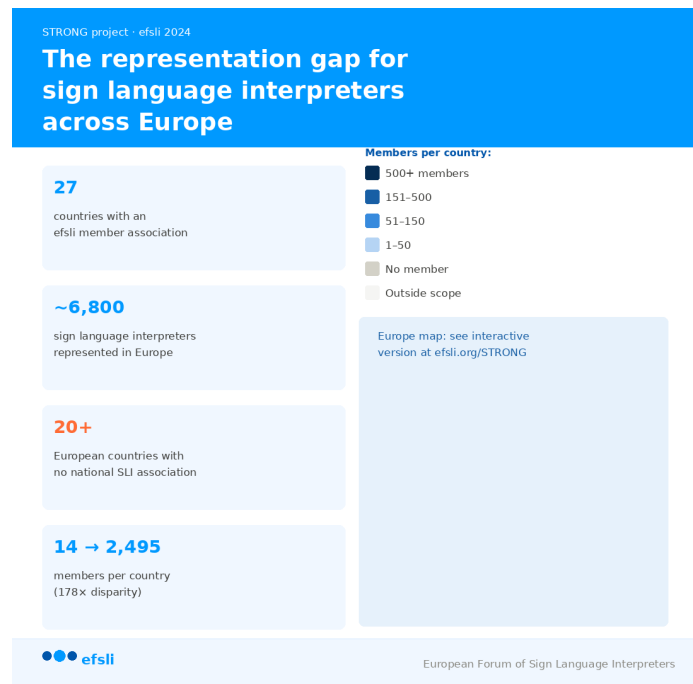


Fig. 1 — The representation gap for sign language interpreters across Europe (efsli, 2024)

Infographic 2 — The European legal framework

Key milestones shaping the rights of sign language interpreters, from the UN CRPD (2006) to the efsli toolkit (2024).



Fig. 2 — The European legal framework for sign language interpreters (efsli, 2024)

SECTION 1

Why representation matters

The working conditions of sign language interpreters (SLIs) across Europe are directly shaped by national legislation — and legislation is shaped by those who advocate for it. Without a national association (NASLI) to represent SLIs, the profession is invisible to policy-makers, excluded from funding decisions, and unable to influence the standards that govern its own practice.

efsl currently represents approximately **~6,800 SLIs across 27 countries**. Yet more than 20 European countries have no national association at all — meaning thousands of interpreters and the deaf communities they serve have no collective voice at the national or European level.



The representation gap for sign language interpreters across Europe

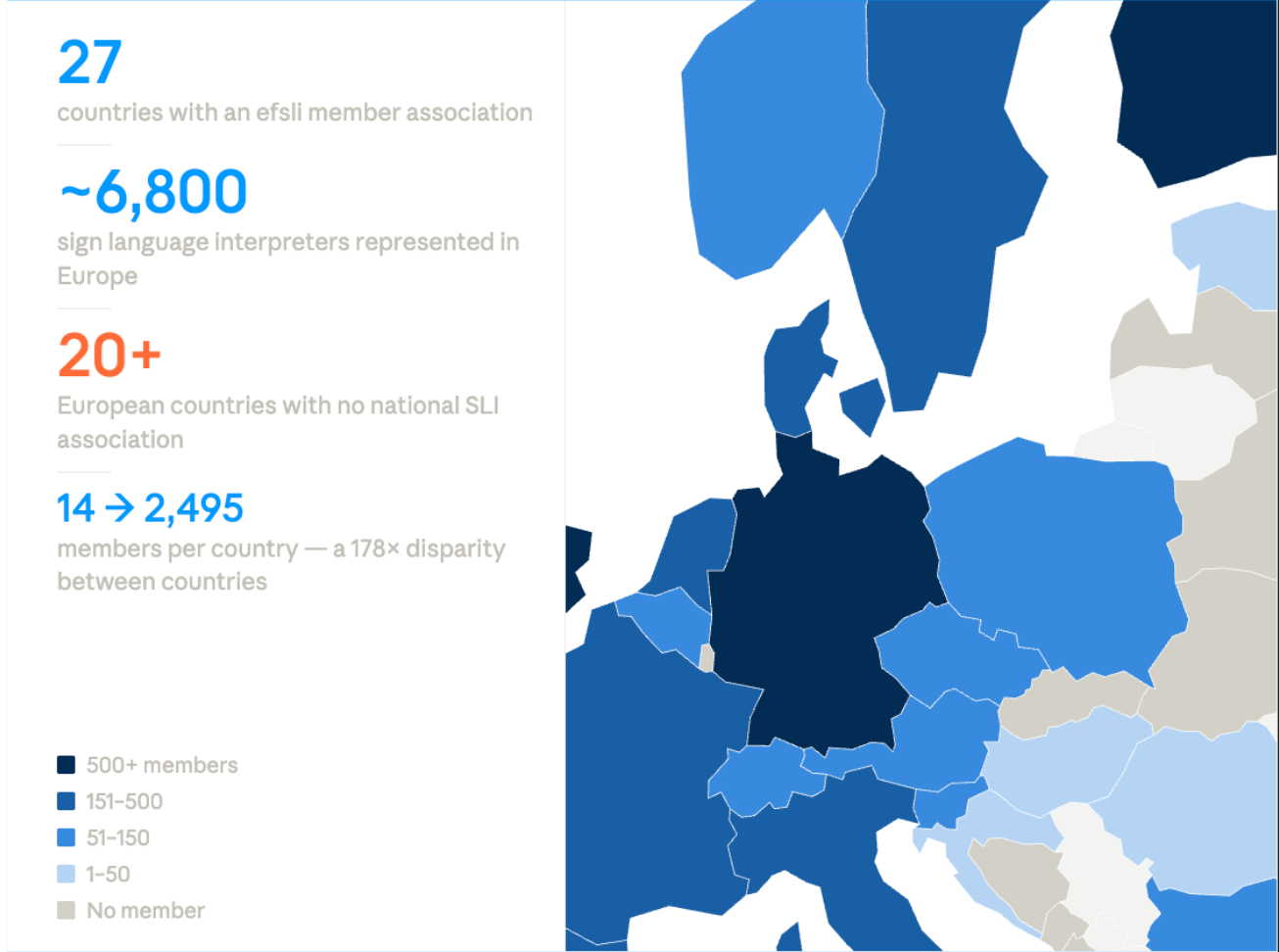


Fig. 3 — efsl member associations by country and size (source: efsl membership data, 2024)

What the research tells us

A substantial and growing body of research documents the precarity of the sign language interpreting profession across Europe and beyond. The key findings are consistent: insecure contracts, wage compression, limited access to CPD, and professional isolation — particularly for interpreters working outside major urban centres. This evidence base has strengthened considerably since 2016, with peer-reviewed studies confirming and extending earlier findings on occupational health, workforce diversity, and the political economy of interpreting services.

Precarity and working conditions

Napier (2011) found that sign language interpreters in multiple European countries predominantly work on a freelance or self-employed basis, with limited access to sick pay, pension schemes, or employment rights. This structural precarity was identified as a primary driver of early career exit.

Moody (2011) documented that interpreters in France — despite the relative strength of the French legal framework — faced significant disparities in pay and recognition compared to spoken language interpreters performing equivalent work in institutional settings.

Hauser, Finch & Hauser (2008) identified interpreter fatigue and the absence of co-working norms as major occupational health risks, with direct consequences for interpretation quality. Their work underpins AIIC recommendations on session duration and team size.

Dean & Pollard (2013), through their demand-control schema applied to sign language interpreting, demonstrated that interpreters operating without professional support structures — supervision, peer networks, CPD — show significantly higher rates of burnout and compassion fatigue. This research has been replicated in European contexts by multiple national NASLIs.

Quality and consumer access

Bontempo & Malcolm (2012) established a direct empirical link between interpreter working conditions — specifically adequate preparation time, appropriate assignment duration, and access to co-interpreters — and interpretation quality as measured by deaf consumers. This evidence base is central to quality assurance advocacy.

Nicodemus & Swabey (2011) documented variation in interpreter competency frameworks across countries, arguing that the absence of standardised European training benchmarks produces a "credentialling gap" that undermines both professional recognition and consumer protection.

Leeson & Vermeerbergen (2010) conducted comparative research across EU member states showing that countries with formal sign language recognition in law — Ireland, Finland, Germany — had measurably better interpreter training infrastructure than those without, directly connecting legislative advocacy to training outcomes.

Training and professional development

Quinto-Pozos (2014) and subsequent European researchers have shown that CPD access is profoundly unequal: interpreters in rural or low-density regions, and those working in languages with smaller user communities, receive on average 40–60% less CPD than urban counterparts. This compounds the representation gap shown in the map above.

Turner & Merrison (2016) argued in their analysis of interpreter education in the UK and Ireland that volunteer-led NASLIs struggle to maintain CPD infrastructure without dedicated funding, creating a self-reinforcing cycle: limited CPD reduces member value, reducing membership income, reducing CPD capacity.

Recent developments (2018–2024)

Pollard, Dean et al. (2021) provided the first biomarker confirmation of occupational health risks in the profession, measuring salivary cortisol levels across interpreter work settings. The study demonstrated that interpreters in video relay and K–12 educational settings show clinically significant cortisol dysregulation — providing physiological evidence for what earlier demand-control schema research had documented through self-report. This study directly strengthens NASLI arguments about working condition standards to commissioners and procurement bodies.

Napier, Skinner, Adam et al. (2022) published the first national census of sign language translators and interpreters in the UK, commissioned by ASLI with 690 respondents (43% of the potential sample). The census provides a statistically robust baseline on workforce demographics, contract types, CPD access, and diversity. It represents a methodological model that NASLIs across Europe can replicate to build the evidence base needed for legislative and procurement advocacy.

Hauland, De Meulder & Napier (2023) introduced a macro-level framework for understanding sign language interpreting services (SLIS) as a social and political institution, not merely a professional service. Their analysis challenges the assumption that more interpreters automatically means more access for deaf people, and argues that the structural conditions under which interpreting services are organised — including NASLI capacity and legislative recognition — fundamentally shape whether those services serve deaf communities' interests. This framing is directly relevant to NASLI advocacy strategies at policy level.

The chain from representation to rights

A NASLI that exists and organises can collect data, build alliances, and speak with authority. A NASLI that speaks with authority can influence legislation. Legislation that recognises the profession creates the conditions for fair pay, proper training, and sustainable careers — and sustainable careers mean better quality interpretation and better access for deaf people.

The European legal framework: key milestones

These texts are the foundation of every advocacy argument a NASLI can make.

- 2006
 - **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)**
 Art. 2 & 9 formally recognise sign languages and mandate accessibility through professional interpretation.
United Nations
- 2010
 - **EU ratifies the CRPD**
 Creates binding obligations for all member states on sign language access and interpreter provision.
European Union
- 2016
 - **European Parliament resolution on SLIs**
 3-year minimum training, national registration systems, quality assurance, equal status with spoken language interpreters.
European Parliament
- 2019
 - **European Accessibility Act (Directive 2019/882)**
 Accessible digital services — directly relevant to remote and online sign language interpreting.
European Union
- 2021
 - **EU Disability Strategy 2021–2030**
 European Disability Card, enhanced communication access, 10-year inclusion framework.
European Union
- 2024
 - **efсли toolkit for NASLIs**
 EU co-funded practical roadmap for NASLIs to advocate at legislative, representational and individual levels.
efсли

SECTION 2

Understanding your NASLI's capacity

Not all NASLIs are equal — and that is fine. What matters is being honest about where you are now, so you can choose actions that are realistic and build momentum over time. The three tiers below are a map of capacity, not a hierarchy of worth.

Tier 1 — Volunteer association	Tier 2 — Semi-professional body	Tier 3 — Professional body / union
No paid staff. Run by working interpreters in their own time. Minimal budget.	1–2 part-time staff. Small operational budget. Some project funding.	Paid staff, legal counsel, comms officer. Sustained membership fees and grants.
<p>What you can do: Collect member data · Code of ethics · efsli membership · Respond to public consultations · Annual member survey</p>	<p>What you can do: Run CPD events · Model contracts · Position papers · Media relationships · Engage politicians · QA framework</p>	<p>What you can do: Lobby for legislation · Sector agreements · Professional insurance · Accreditation · EU-level advocacy via efsli</p>
<p><i>E.g. Croatia (CASLI), Estonia (EVK), Lithuania (LASLI)</i></p>	<p><i>E.g. Portugal (ANAPI-LG), Slovenia (ZTSZJ), Ireland (CISLI)</i></p>	<p><i>E.g. UK (ASLI), Germany (BGSD), Finland (Language Experts)</i></p>

The key insight: a Tier 1 association that tries to run a national accreditation scheme will burn out its volunteers. A Tier 3 body that only organises CPD events is under-using its capacity. Match your actions to your resources — then grow.

Moving up a tier: what it takes

The single biggest lever is **funding**. Most NASLIs move from Tier 1 to Tier 2 by securing a first Erasmus+ or national grant allowing them to hire a part-time coordinator. efsli can support this through operating grant applications and by sharing project templates with member associations.

The second lever is **membership growth**. Every additional member means more income, more legitimacy with policy-makers, and more data for advocacy. Investing in member benefits — CPD, model contracts, legal templates — is how NASLIs attract and retain members.

SECTION 3

Setting priorities: what to do first

Faced with everything that needs to change, it is easy to be paralysed. The matrix below maps common NASLI actions by **impact on members** and **resource cost**. Start top-left. Build towards top-right.

	LOW resource cost	HIGH resource cost
HIGH IMPACT	✓ Code of ethics ✓ CPD calendar ✓ Member survey & data publication ✓ Model working contract ✓ QA framework (internal) ✓ Respond to public consultations ✓ efsli membership	✓ National accreditation scheme ✓ Professional insurance (ASLI model) ✓ Legislative lobby campaign ✓ Sector collective agreement ✓ National CPD standard ✓ EU-level advocacy via efsli
LOWER IMPACT	→ Social media → Newsletter → Annual general meeting → Website update	✗ Avoid until higher-impact actions in place: ✗ Large conference events ✗ Bespoke research projects ✗ Complex multi-partner projects

Advocacy angle: quality assurance

Quality assurance (QA) is one of the most powerful — and underused — advocacy tools available to NASLIs. The research evidence is clear: interpretation quality is directly linked to working conditions (Bontempo & Malcolm, 2012), and the occupational health consequences of poor working conditions have now been confirmed at a physiological level (Pollard, Dean et al., 2021). This creates a strategic opportunity: by framing working conditions as a quality and public health issue rather than purely a labour issue, NASLIs can reach audiences — healthcare commissioners, legal services, government procurement teams — who would not otherwise engage with a professional association.

A NASLI QA framework should include:

- A **competency framework** defining minimum skills for practising SLIs — linked to the 2016 EP resolution standard of 3 years of full-time training.
- **Working condition standards** specifying minimum requirements for assignment duration, preparation time, co-working arrangements, and rest periods — based on AIIC guidelines adapted for sign language interpreting.
- **Consumer feedback mechanisms** — simple tools allowing deaf clients to rate and flag interpretation quality, generating data that NASLIs can use in advocacy with commissioners.
- **Incident reporting** — a confidential system for interpreters to report situations where conditions compromised quality or safety. This data is essential for evidence-based lobbying of procurement bodies.

Connecting QA to procurement: once a QA framework exists, NASLIs can approach public bodies commissioning interpreting services and argue that their tender specifications must require compliance with the framework. This is the mechanism by which Norwegian and Swedish NASLIs have embedded CPD requirements in public procurement — see Section 5.

Advocacy angle: training and education

Training standards are the foundation of both professional recognition and quality assurance. The 2016 European Parliament resolution is explicit: a minimum of three years of full-time equivalent training. Yet across Europe, interpreter training ranges from no formal pathway at all to university-level master's programmes. This gap is both an injustice and an advocacy opportunity.

What NASLIs can do on training, by tier:

- **Tier 1:** Map existing training pathways in your country. Document the gap between what exists and the EP resolution standard. This data is your first advocacy document.
- **Tier 1–2:** Build a relationship with the nearest university or higher education institution offering anything adjacent to interpreter training. Even a memorandum of understanding creates a platform for joint CPD and eventual curriculum influence.
- **Tier 2:** Develop a CPD framework with defined competency areas (linguistic, ethical, cultural, technical) and minimum annual hours. Publish it. This becomes the reference point for all training discussions.
- **Tier 2–3:** Engage with the ministry of education to include SLI training requirements in vocational qualification frameworks. Reference the EP resolution and the CRPD as binding obligations.
- **Tier 3:** Negotiate formal recognition of a national SLI qualification. Seek to make NASLI membership or certification a requirement for public sector interpreter provision — this is the model in Finland and increasingly in the UK.

Focus: developing your CPD offer

CPD is the highest-impact, lowest-cost action a Tier 1 or 2 NASLI can take. Turner & Merrison (2016) found that CPD access is the single strongest predictor of membership retention across European NASLIs. A minimum viable CPD offer:

- Start with 2–3 online webinars per year on practical topics: ethical dilemmas, specialised settings (healthcare, legal, education), working with deaf interpreters.
- Partner with a university to co-deliver CPD — reduces cost and increases credibility.
- Track participation data: hours, number of participants, domains covered. This is your evidence for funding applications and legislative advocacy.
- As resources grow, develop a formal CPD log system for members and eventually minimum annual hour requirements — the basis for an accreditation system.

Focus: professional insurance — the ASLI model

ASLI (UK) negotiated a group professional indemnity insurance scheme for its members — one of the most tangible benefits any NASLI can offer. Prerequisites: minimum membership base (~50+), a published code of ethics, and ideally a CPD framework.

- ASLI acts as negotiating body with a specialist insurer, securing group rates individual interpreters cannot access alone.
- Members pay an annual premium as part of or alongside their membership fee.
- Coverage: professional liability, public liability, and increasingly cyber liability for remote interpreting.
- **First step:** contact efsli to connect with ASLI and request their model documentation.

SECTION 4

Lobby strategies: step by step

Lobbying is about making it easy for decision-makers to make the right decision. The most effective NASLI advocacy is evidence-based, coalition-supported, and persistent.

Step 1

Collect your data

- You cannot advocate for what you cannot measure. Before anything else, know your numbers.
- Annual member survey: working conditions, income, contract types, hours, geographical distribution.
- Map the interpreting landscape: how many SLIs are active in your country? Trained vs untrained? Urban vs rural?
- Document unmet demand: sectors or regions where deaf people cannot access interpreters. This is your most powerful advocacy data point.
- Use Tally or equivalent for lightweight, recurring surveys. Share anonymised data with efsli to build the European picture.
- Reference the research: Dean & Pollard (2013), Bontempo & Malcolm (2012), Napier (2011), and Napier, Skinner et al. (2022) provide methodological templates for national surveys. The ASLI UK census (Napier et al., 2022) is particularly useful as a model for workforce data collection that can be adapted to any national context.

Step 2

Identify actors and allies

- Map your stakeholders before approaching anyone. Three concentric circles:
- Inner circle — natural allies: national deaf association, deafblind organisations, disability rights organisations, interpreter training institutions.
- Middle circle — potential allies: disability ombudsman, parliamentary disability committee, spoken language interpreter associations, trade unions (for labour rights angle).
- Outer circle — decision-makers to influence: ministry of education (training standards), ministry of labour (working conditions), healthcare and legal commissioners (QA standards), procurement bodies (calls for tenders).
- Principle: never go to a decision-maker alone. Always bring a deaf organisation ally. "Nothing About Us Without Us" is both ethically correct and strategically stronger.

Step 3

Build your message

- Policy-makers respond to problems, not professions. Frame your ask around the access gap for deaf citizens — then show it is inseparable from SLI working conditions.
- Core structure: "Deaf people in [country] cannot reliably access [service] because there are not enough qualified interpreters. There are not enough qualified interpreters because the profession is not regulated/funded/recognised. Here is what needs to change."
- For QA audiences (commissioners, healthcare bodies): lead with Bontempo & Malcolm (2012) — quality is directly linked to working conditions. Poor working conditions = poor quality = risk to deaf clients.
- For training audiences (ministries, universities): cite the 2016 EP resolution 3-year standard and Nicodemus & Swabey (2011) on credentialling gaps.
- Always attach a concrete, costed ask. "Include SLI qualification requirements in the forthcoming revision of the [law]" is an ask. "Recognise sign language interpreting as a regulated profession" is a goal.
- Cite the EP resolution and the CRPD — your ask is aligned with binding EU commitments.

Step 4

Choose your channel

- Low resource: written responses to public consultations, letters to ministers, participation in disability sector coalitions, social media campaigns (International Day of Sign Languages, 23 September).
- Medium resource: meetings with parliamentary committees, position papers, media relationships, joint statements with deaf organisations.
- Higher resource: commissioned research, formal lobbying of ministry officials, participation in European-level processes via efsli.

Step 5

Measure and report back

- After each action: did you get a meeting? A written response? A mention in a consultation outcome? A change in a draft law?
- Share your progress with efsli — both successes and failures. Other NASLIs learn from both.
- Build a simple advocacy log: date, action, target, outcome, next step. This is your institutional memory and your grant reporting evidence.

SECTION 5

Concrete examples from across Europe

These examples are proof points: evidence that change is possible, and practical starting points for your own advocacy conversations.

UK — ASLI: professional insurance and accreditation

ASLI (Association of Sign Language Interpreters) is one of Europe's most developed NASLIs, with nearly 700 members. Key achievements: a group professional indemnity insurance scheme; a national register of qualified interpreters; a CPD framework with minimum annual hours; active parliamentary advocacy on access to justice and healthcare interpreting. ASLI's strength comes from a combination of sustained membership fees, Tier 3 staffing, and a close working relationship with the British Deaf Association. Their QA framework, developed in collaboration with Deaf sector organisations, has become a reference point for public sector procurement of interpreting services.

Key takeaway: ASLI did not start here. The insurance scheme came after 20+ years of building membership. Start with the register and the CPD framework — they are prerequisites for insurance negotiation.

Finland — Finnish Language Experts: scale and professionalisation

Finland's NASLI is the largest in Europe by membership (2,495 but not only interpreters are members it can also be language experts), reflecting a well-developed legal framework that recognises sign language in the Finnish constitution and mandates funded interpretation services. Interpreters are employed rather than freelance in many settings, and there are collective agreements and recommendations governing pay and conditions. The NASLI's role has evolved from advocacy to sector governance — maintaining standards and negotiating sector-level agreements. This outcome is directly traceable to decades of consistent data collection and political relationship-building.

Key takeaway: Constitutional recognition did not happen overnight. Finnish NASLIs spent decades building the evidence base and political relationships. The data you collect today is the argument you make in ten years.

Scandinavia — CPD frameworks linked to procurement

Norway (TIA) and Sweden (STTF) developed formal CPD frameworks requiring interpreters to complete minimum development hours annually. These frameworks are now referenced in public procurement criteria — meaning commissioners require CPD compliance. The mechanism: NASLIs engaged healthcare and government commissioners early, before tender specifications were finalised, and proposed CPD compliance as a quality safeguard rather than a professional demand. This reframing — QA rather than labour rights — was decisive in securing commissioner buy-in.

Key takeaway: A CPD framework linked to procurement becomes a de facto quality standard. Work with commissioners early to embed CPD requirements in their tender specifications.

Germany — managing multiple associations and training advocacy

Germany has two main NASLIs (BGSD and TGSD) covering different professional communities, totalling 575 members. Both are efsli members and coordinate positions at the European level. Germany's training landscape is relatively strong by European standards, with university-level programmes at several institutions. German NASLIs have been active in advocating for standardised training requirements within the vocational qualification framework, using the EP resolution as the primary reference document.

Key takeaway: If your country has multiple associations, prioritise coordination on legislative asks. A joint position paper signed by multiple associations carries more weight than separate submissions.

SECTION 6

Academic references and further reading

The advocacy arguments in this guide are grounded in peer-reviewed research. Below are the key sources, organised by theme.

Precarity and working conditions

- Napier, J. (2011).** *Sign language interpreter working conditions: A comparative overview of Europe*. *Interpreting*, 13(2), 167–196
- Moody, B. (2011).** *Etat des lieux de l'interprétation en langue des signes française*. *Revue IRIS*, 4, 87–110
- Dean, R. K., & Pollard, R. Q. (2013).** *The Demand Control Schema: Interpreting as a Practice Profession*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing
- Hauser, P. C., Finch, K., & Hauser, A. (2008).** *Deaf Professionals and Designated Interpreters: A New Paradigm*. Gallaudet University Press

Quality assurance and consumer outcomes

- Bontempo, K., & Malcolm, K. (2012).** *An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure: Educating interpreters about the risk of vicarious trauma in healthcare settings*. *Healthcare Interpreting and Translation*, 105–130
- Nicodemus, B., & Swabey, L. (2011).** *Advances in Interpreting Research: Inquiry in Action*. John Benjamins Publishing
- Leeson, L., & Vermeerbergen, M. (2010).** *Sign language interpreting and transliterating*. John Benjamins Publishing

Training and professional development

- Quinto-Pozos, D. (2014).** *Multilingual aspects of signed language communication and disorder*. *Multilingual Matters*
- Turner, G. H., & Merrison, A. J. (2016).** *Doing "understanding" in dialogue interpreting: Advancing theory and practice*. *Interpreting*, 18(2), 137–171
- Pollard, R. Q., Dean, R. K., Samar, V. J., Knigga, L. M., & Taylor, T. L. (2021).** *Cortisol dysregulation among American Sign Language interpreters in different work settings: Confirmation of occupational health risks*. *Interpreting and Society*, 1(1), 28–50.
- Napier, J., Skinner, R., Adam, R., Stone, C., Pratt, S., Hinton, D. P., & Obasi, C. (2022).** *Representation and diversity in the sign language translation and interpreting profession in the United Kingdom*. *Interpreting and Society*, 2(2), 119–140.
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- Napier, J., McKee, R., & Goswell, D. (2010).** *Sign Language Interpreting: Theory and Practice in Australia and New Zealand (2nd ed.)*. The Federation Press

Legal and policy frameworks

- European Parliament (2016).** *Resolution of 23 November 2016 on sign languages and professional sign language interpreters (2016/2952(RSP))*. European Parliament
- United Nations (2006).** *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*. UN General Assembly, A/RES/61/106
- European Commission (2021).** *Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030*. COM(2021) 101 final

efsli resources

efsli (2024). *Toolkit for European national associations of sign language interpreters.* efsli, Brussels

SECTION 7

Resources and next steps

The most important step is the next one.

efsli toolkit for NASLIs (2024)

Foundational reference for NASLI action at civil society, representational and individual levels. Available at efsli.org.

EP resolution, 23 Nov 2016

The key EU legislative reference for SLI rights. Cite in every letter to policy-makers. Available on europarl.europa.eu.

UN CRPD (2006)

The international human rights framework. Your government has ratified it — hold them to it. Available at ohchr.org.

European Accessibility Act

Directive 2019/882. Relevant to all digital and remote interpreting services. Full text at eur-lex.europa.eu.

Your next three actions

1. Complete the efsli member survey this year and share your data — every data point strengthens the European advocacy picture.
2. Identify one ally organisation in your country (deaf association, disability rights body) and schedule a joint meeting to align your legislative priorities.
3. Choose one concrete action from the priority matrix in Section 3 that is achievable within your current capacity — and do it before the end of this year.

Get in touch with efsli

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