

Joint Statement

Mid-Minnesota Legal Aid’s Minnesota Disability Law Center (“MDLC”), representing St. Cloud area members of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community (“Deaf Community”), have entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with CentraCare and CentraCare – St. Cloud Hospital (“CentraCare”) to make significant improvements in the Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) system for patients or their companions who are deaf or hard of hearing.

CentraCare is dedicated to ensuring full and equal access to health care services for patients and companions who are deaf. It is CentraCare’s policy to provide sign language interpreters promptly to facilitate communication during both scheduled and unscheduled visits. For unscheduled visits, CentraCare uses a VRI system to offer timely interpreter services while awaiting the arrival of an in-person interpreter, reflecting its commitment to delivering seamless care and support to all individuals.

Between 2017 and the present, members of the St. Cloud Deaf Community have experienced problems when they came to CentraCare facilities for health care services when the VRI system did not function effectively.

Members of the St. Cloud Deaf Community, represented by MDLC, entered into a voluntary dispute resolution process with CentraCare to address concerns with the VRI system. Together, they selected an independent evaluator to conduct a comprehensive review, identify issues, and recommend improvements. During COVID, CentraCare made significant improvement to its Wi-Fi system including expanding broadband capacity and increasing the number of Wi-Fi hubs in its facilities, which contributed significantly to improvements in the VRI system. After delays due to COVID-19 and other factors, the independent evaluator completed an assessment and provided recommendations. The evaluation included two separate on-site inspections at St Cloud Hospital in 2023 and 2024, during which the independent evaluator was accompanied by members for the Deaf Community.

As a result of the independent expert evaluation, CentraCare agreed to make certain improvements to its VRI system. Those improvements can be summarized as follows:

- CentraCare will maintain a Wi-Fi System to provide VRI services at CentraCare facilities that meets or exceeds the technical standards of the system in use at the times it was inspected by the independent evaluator.
- CentraCare will continue to implement its policy of using in-person sign language interpreters to communicate with patients and companions who are deaf for all scheduled appointments.
- In cases of non-scheduled appointments (such as Emergency Room visits) CentraCare will immediately contact agencies that provide in-person sign language interpreters and use VRI only while waiting for an in-person interpreter.
- CentraCare will endeavor to require its VRI vendors/service provider to meet certain minimum standards and requirements in its vendor agreements by including those standards and requirements in its requests for proposals and contracts with VRI service providers
- CentraCare will conduct quarterly tests of its VRI system and VRI hardware to confirm that its hardware and its vendor(s) are in compliance with the minimum standards and requirements, and CentraCare will send report of these tests and results to MDLC every six months for two years.
- CentraCare will terminate its contracts with VRI providers who do not comply with/meet standards after one warning and sixty days to remedy, provided a new vendor who can meet the standards is identified and available to contract with CentraCare and compatible with the system.
- CentraCare will contract with two more ASL VRI providers within 90 days.
- CentraCare will continue to use and have available in its facilities an adequate number of VRI Carts.
- CentraCare's periodic staff training shall include training concerning the correct and effective use of the VRI system.

MDLC and CentraCare have jointly achieved this resolution for the benefit of all persons receiving services from CentraCare facilities who are deaf. This understanding reflects CentraCare's unwavering commitment to inclusivity, ensuring that everyone in our community receives the high-quality care they deserve.