Hello everyone,

My name is Mira Suomela, and I have worked as a sign language interpreter for 25 years. Throughout my entire career, I have also interpreted for the deafblind. I would like to briefly tell you how, in my view, interpreting for the deafblind differs from other sign language interpreting work.

In Finland, Deaf individuals are granted 180 hours of interpreting services per year, while deafblind people receive 360 hours. If those hours are finished, they can apply for more, and these requests are almost always approved. Therefore, using an interpreter is always free for our clients; perhaps because of this, we interpreters are involved in our clients' lives literally from birth to death.

The spectrum of deafblindness is diverse, and as a result, there are as many interpretation and communication methods as there are clients. An interpreter must also be ready to switch communication methods mid-task if the situation or environment changes. For example, a client's receptivity, the lighting, or the physical distance between the interpreter and the client might change so that signing within a narrow field of vision is no longer effective. Therefore we change to tactile interpreting. An interpreter needs to be flexible and adapt smoothly. One might also need to pay more attention to clothing than when interpreting for the Deaf; for instance, solid colors are important, though the specific color may vary depending on the client's needs. That said, black is usually the safest option.

Beyond language translation, the interpreter acts as the eyes of the deafblind person. We describe the environment, actions, people, and essentially everything the interpreter sees whenever possible. From a safety perspective, when guiding a client, the interpreter keeps an eye out for potential obstacles or hazards—not just on the ground, but also overhead, especially if the client is taller than the interpreter.

In social situations, an interpreter can use haptics to convey people's reactions, emotions, and other actions —skills we have been learning here. When signing, one must remember that facial expressions for questions or other emotions may not be visible to the client, so these should be verbalized or signaled in some other way.

We are fortunate in Finland that, especially for longer assignments, we work in pairs. This allows for more versatile collaboration. For example, when interpreting ice hockey matches with Aarne, one interpreter signs what's happening in the game, tells which team has the puck, while the other interpreter "draws" the movement of the puck on his back. By drawing on the back, we can also convey the atmosphere of the arena, the cheering, and the goals. This involves a fair amount of improvisation, as there aren't established signs for everything. During breaks, we can discuss what worked and what didn't; through this teamwork, we provide the most comprehensive game experience possible.

When interpreting for the deafblind, one must accept being in physical contact with another person and feel comfortable with touch. Exercise classes for example: sometimes the easiest way to show a new movement is for the client to feel the interpreter's body to see how the legs, arms, and body move.

Generally, the interpreter is more "in the thick of it"—it’s not enough to stand at the edge of a swimming pool or a sports field signing; you often have to be right where the action is. You have to put your own body on the line.

Sign language interpreting for the deafblind and our other client groups is truly interesting and inspiring, but also challenging and sometimes incredibly difficult. Still, I sincerely hope to continue working as an interpreter, perhaps even until my retirement.