

## **INTERPRETERS FOR PEOPLE WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (LEP)**

Do you live in Washington? Is English your first language? Most people find learning a second language difficult. But if English is not your first language, and if you have trouble speaking, or understanding English easily, help may be available. Interpreters are often able to help people like you, with limited English skills ("Limited English Proficiency, or "LEP"), to deal with business or personal issues.

### **What is an interpreter?**

An interpreter transfers one language, presented **orally**, to another.

### **How can an interpreter help me?**

When you need to understand exactly what's going on, or when you need to be understood, an interpreter can be very important. Many people can manage to speak English at the store or even at work. And in many situations a family member or friend can be interpret if you need help. But when you go to see a doctor, a lawyer, or a government agency, a skilled interpreter can give you extra protection.

A skilled interpreter can convey all the important details about your situation. A skilled interpreter will understand the words that a doctor or lawyer, for instance, says and will explain them to you. A skilled interpreter won't make mistakes that cause you problems then – or later on. And if you use a skilled interpreter, rather than your child or friend, you won't have to share private, personal information, like medical symptoms or the amount of your debts, with your child or friend.

### **What is a "certified" interpreter?**

An interpreter can receive "certification" from the State of Washington or from the federal government to interpret a certain language. This means that the interpreter has a high level of skill. Some interpreters are specially certified to work with medical issues, legal issues, or social service issues. An interpreter can also be "qualified" by passing a test in a language that is not covered by a certification test, or a test given by another jurisdiction. In general your best choice is a certified interpreter.

Certified interpreters are required to follow a Code of Conduct that requires them

- to be accurate
- to keep the materials they interpret or translate confidential
- to be courteous and professional
- not to take sides if their work involves disputes.

Any interpreter, certified or not, must also follow certain ethical standards:

- to interpret everything that you say, without explaining or summarizing or adding details
- to tell everyone if he is having trouble interpreting, for example because of differences in dialect
- to tell everyone if he knows you

### **When should I use a *certified* or *qualified* interpreter?**

You should use a certified or qualified interpreter when it's important for you to understand what's going on, in words that make sense to you. Use that interpreter, too, when it's important that the person you're talking to understands you. For instance, use that interpreter when:

- you are seeing a doctor or medical professional for any important reason (example -- take a certified or qualified interpreter if you are sick and need to find out what's wrong, but not when you are just getting a flu shot)
- you have been served with legal papers that might affect your legal rights, and need to figure out what to do
- you are meeting with a social worker to discuss your application for Social Security Disability benefits

### **How do I know if an interpreter is skilled?**

You need to be comfortable that your interpreter is skilled. Here are some questions you can ask:

- What training do you have as an interpreter?
- What work have you done as an interpreter? How long? How many clients?
- What interpreting certificates do you have?
- What dialects of my language are you able to interpret?

Even if you don't speak English well, you can tell if your interpreter is doing a good job. You should understand what your interpreter says to you in your first language. And you can look for these clues:

- the interpreter should use the 1<sup>st</sup> person form, not 3<sup>rd</sup> person, when interpreting someone else's comments to you (If your doctor says "I see Juan's temperature is high" the interpreter should not say "He sees Juan's temperature is high.")
- the interpreter should refer to himself as "the interpreter", not "I".
- the interpreter should take notes during the conversation (this means the interpretation is more likely to be accurate)
- the interpreter should ask you to pause in the middle of a very long sentence (this means each portion won't be too long to interpret accurately)
- the interpreter should tell you when he doesn't understand something you are saying.

If you see or hear these things, your interpreter may not be skilled:

- the interpreter's version of what you say, or what is said to you, is much shorter than the original version
- the interpreter has a conversation with someone else involved in your meeting or hearing without explaining to you what the conversation is about
- the interpreter's facial expression or body language doesn't show you respect

Does your interpreter appear unskilled, based on these clues? If so, you should ask the interpreter to correct the problems you see, or request another interpreter.

### **What can I do to help my interpreter do the best job?**

Here are some ways you can help your interpreter, and get the best results:

- Pause at the end of your sentences, to make sure that the interpreter has a chance to translate before you move on.
- Do not interrupt while the interpreter is speaking.
- If you do not understand a question or a comment, ask for an explanation.
- If you do not know the meaning of a word or phrase, ask for a definition.
- If you do not understand why you are being asked a particular question, ask why.
- If you do not understand why you are being asked to do something, ask why.  
Explain what you think is a better alternative.

### **How can I get an interpreter?**

Many state and federal agencies will provide professional interpreters to LEP people. So will many groups that receive any sort of assistance from the federal government. In this state you can usually get a professional interpreter when you are dealing a service provider, including the following kinds:

- most hospitals
- public and private colleges
- public school districts
- federal and state government agencies
- local housing authorities
- many city and county agencies
- community organizations
- federal, state and local courts, for criminal and civil court hearings and some settlement conferences – including juvenile court, diversion and youth court, and domestic violence or sexual assault protection order hearings
- administrative hearings (hearings at government agencies like the Division of Child Support and Social Security)
- prosecuting attorneys
- law enforcement officers (police, sheriffs)
- departments of correction (jail, prison)
- some drug rehabilitation and domestic violence programs
- 911 and other fire, emergency and crisis intervention services
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If you need an interpreter, be sure to ask the people you're dealing with for this service. Do so as early as possible, to allow time for the agency to find a satisfactory interpreter for you. Most will be able to provide the service.

### **How much will the interpreter cost?**

Most federal, state and local agencies will provide interpreter services for free. Free interpreter services are provided in many other situations, as well.

If a state or federal court or a government body starts a proceeding, it will usually pay for an interpreter during that proceeding

- if you are a criminal defendant or a witness in a criminal trial,

- if you are a party in a civil matter,
- if you are summoned by the court or a state agency for any hearing (criminal proceeding, grand jury proceeding, coroner's inquest, and mental health proceedings, for example) initiated by that court or agency, or
- if you are on public assistance or can otherwise show that you cannot afford this service.

Sometimes, such as when you are working with a private attorney or doctor, you may have to cover these costs yourself. Always ask, however, if there is any way you can get help with some or all of this cost – in many cases, there is.

**What can I do if an agency or court refuses to provide or pay for an interpreter?**

If an agency or court refuses to provide or pay for an interpreter, call CLEAR for advice, at \_\_\_\_\_. CLEAR may tell you to send a letter of complaint to the office of civil rights for the federal agency or, for a group receiving federal funding, to the office of civil rights at the federal agency that provides those funds. You can find most of these addresses as [www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/Federal%20Agency-Recipient%20Chart.pdf](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/cor/Federal%20Agency-Recipient%20Chart.pdf).

**What if I receive a document written in English, and cannot understand it?**

Many agencies and courts have prepared versions of standard documents in languages other than English – very often in Spanish. If you cannot read a document in English, ask if a version written in your first language is available. If not, ask if the agency or court has a “translator.” A translator transfers one language, presented *in writing*, to another. The translator will explain to you what the document says.

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