



Where to Start Toolkit

Ensuring Effective and Accurate Interpretation



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Tips: Ensuring Effective and Accurate Interpretation

To serve sexual assault (SA) survivors effectively, you'll want to both understand what the survivor needs as well as share information about how you can help meet those needs. When working with survivors who speak no or limited English, it's helpful to have protocols in place; this includes the effective use of interpreters. Following are some suggestions for your consideration.

Does your client need an interpreter?

- If your client does not speak English.** If you cannot determine what language your client speaks you can either use a language line or language identification cards to help identify their language.
- If your client is a non-native English speaker.** Many clients find it difficult to talk about sexual assault. Talking about sexual assault in a non-native language can be challenging and many non-native English speaking clients may prefer to work with an interpreter. In addition, some clients may prefer to communicate in English, but may not be able to do so effectively. You should offer both types of clients the assistance of an interpreter.
 - *Tip:* Assure your client that the use of an interpreter is a free service.

Who can interpret?

- Use professionally trained interpreters.** Familiarize yourself with agencies or businesses providing interpretation locally as well as national telephone services. Determine what, if any, training interpreters may have received on sexual assault.
 - Ask the interpreter about his or her qualifications. For example: How many years of experience do you have with both English and the second language? What training and experience do you have as an interpreter? Are you certified or have you otherwise been qualified to interpret in court? Have you had any training on sexual assault issues?
 - Remember: It is never appropriate to use children or other family members as interpreters. It is also unwise to use other untrained community members as interpreters because of their possible relationship with the perpetrator, the potential shame, embarrassment and other privacy issues for the victim. (The



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community member may also not have any training or understanding regarding sexual assault-related interpreting, including victim response, vocabulary, etc.

- *Tip:* Make sure that the interpreter and the client speak the same dialect, if there are multiple dialects.
- *Tip:* Be conscious of potential gender concerns. Some victims of sexual assault and/or interpreters may not feel comfortable with an interpreter or client of the same or opposite sex.
- **Conduct a conflict check.** Be sure that the interpreter is not known or associated with the victim or perpetrator in any way. This could compromise the victim's comfort, confidentiality and safety as well as the interpretation.
- **Communicate with interpreters before hiring them.** Talk to the interpreter about what will be discussed during the interview. If the interpreter feels embarrassed by the subject matter, cannot adequately interpret everything said or feels that it is disrespectful to say the words the perpetrator used, you will need to find a different interpreter.

Working with an Interpreter Before the Interview

- **Meet in advance with the interpreter.** Discuss how the interpretation will be conducted; practice if necessary. Arrange for the victim and interpreter to talk before the interview to ensure that they understand each other; if they do not, you will need to find a new interpreter. If the interpreter has no training on working with sexual assault victims, do a general training on sexual assault, how to work with a victim, and common terminology used.
 - Be sure the interpreter knows that it is critical to interpret everything that is said without changing the meaning, adding, or omitting anything.
 - Ask the interpreter to speak in the first person. For example, if the survivor says "I was scared" the interpreter should say, "I was scared."
 - Explain that if the survivor does not understand something, the interpreter should ask you to clarify rather than trying to directly explain what you mean to the client.
 - Establish a signal that the interpreter can use to ask you to slow down. Remind the interpreter that he or she should feel free to ask you or the survivor to slow down to assure accurate interpretation.
 - Encourage the interpreter to take notes if it helps to provide a more accurate interpretation. Ask that the notes remain behind, so you can dispose of them in a confidential manner. Get proper paperwork signed.



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Interpreters should sign both a confidentiality agreement and a statement that they agree to abide by the interpreters' Code of Professional Responsibility.

Working with a Survivor and an Interpreter During an Interview

- **Speak directly to the client, NOT the interpreter.** Remember your goal is to help build trust and rapport with the survivor, not the interpreter. Therefore, you should speak directly to and have eye contact with the survivor.
 - *Hint:* Have the interpreter sit diagonally behind the client so that you are looking and speaking directly to the survivor, but can still see and hear the interpreter clearly.
- **Speak slowly using short sentences and frequent pauses.** Try not to use legal vocabulary or slang words. Speaking in simple English without using slang, abbreviations, or acronyms will make it easier for you to be understood and for the interpreter to interpret. For example, expressions such as “Are we on the same page?” or “How did things go down?” can be confusing if literally interpreted.
- **Limit side conversations between the interpreter and the client.** If your client begins a side conversation with the interpreter, tactfully steer the conversation back to you by reminding the interpreter that you need to know everything that the client is saying. Remind the survivor that you – and not the interpreter – are there to answer any questions the survivor may have.
- **Allow your interpreter to educate you about cultural context.** The interpreter working with you is a valuable resource to aid in your understanding of what the victim is telling you. Literal interpretation or literal translation sometimes leads to misunderstandings and may be insufficient without a cultural context to add the full meaning. If you reach a point in the interview where the victim is not understanding what you are asking or if the victim is not responding to the question you are asking, ask the interpreter for any insight into what the issue may be and to help explain the cultural significance of certain statements. Discuss in advance how you might do this.
- **Take breaks!** Initial interviews for sexual assault may be lengthy and emotionally difficult. Make sure to take breaks to benefit you, the survivor and the interpreter, too.