



### Working with Interpreters: Job Aid for DHS Employees

As an employee of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), you may encounter a broad range of persons in the course of your work, including individuals who have **limited English proficiency (LEP)**. DHS is both committed and legally obligated to take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access for these individuals.<sup>1</sup> This job aid will help you provide that access when using an interpreter, but be sure to always refer to your Component's language access plan for specifics.

#### Setting up the Interview

1. **Ensure that the location is private**, both visually and audibly, especially if using a speaker phone for telephonic interpretation.
2. **If the interpreter is physically present, position the interpreter next to, and slightly behind, the interviewee.** This will facilitate a conversation between you and the interviewee rather than between you and the interpreter.
3. **Ensure that any documents that will be provided to the interviewee during the interview have been translated.**

#### Preparing the Interpreter

1. **Brief the interpreter in advance.** Provide general background and the context of the interview; provide specific instructions of what information needs to be obtained. Importantly, provide background on the LEP individual, if known, including: country and region/city of origin, education and literacy level, and any relevant additional information. See the sample background statement on page 3.
2. **Verify that the interpreter is familiar with specialized terminology** (e.g., law enforcement, immigration, medical, disaster).
3. **Request that the interpreter identify and clarify any cultural issues** that may be pertinent. Ask that you be told to rephrase a question if needed. Cultural nuances can impact language and technical terms. **Direct the interpreter to avoid paraphrasing** and let you know if you need to repeat or slow down.
4. **Be sure to screen interpreters to eliminate a potential conflict of interest.** In cases where an individual fears someone from his or her home country, an interpreter from the same region may make that individual **feel uncomfortable or unsafe**. Asking whether the interviewee feels comfortable with the interpreter resolves this conflict. Similarly, use of an informal interpreter, such as a family member, bystander, or fellow employee can represent a conflict of interest that may undermine the accuracy and reliability of the interpretation.

#### Identifying LEP Individuals

An LEP person is someone who does not speak English as his or her primary language and has a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English. At the first point of contact, determine whether that person is LEP and, if so, his/her primary language.

Do not assume an understanding of the primary language from the country of origin; some may speak an indigenous language or another altogether.

- Has the person self-identified as LEP;
- Has the person requested an interpreter or translator; or
- Do you believe the person does not speak or understand English well enough to participate fully or understand questions and answer them without difficulty?

Arrange appropriate language assistance if necessary.

#### Telephone Interpretation Tips

Telephonic interpretation can be quick, cost-effective, and high quality. If it is available make sure you have a working portable phone or other communication device with a speakerphone.

- Know how to work the speakerphone and test call the interpretation service
- Check the volume before starting a call
- Ensure the number is on speed dial
- Know the access code, if required
- Note the interpreter's ID number

Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_

Access Code: \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> See Executive Order 13166, Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency; U.S. Dep't of Homeland Sec., Language Access Plan (2012), <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/crcl/crcl-dhs-language-access-plan.pdf>; Limited English Proficiency: A Federal Interagency Website, <http://www.lep.gov>.

# Effective Communication with Persons who are Limited English Proficient



## During the Interpretation Session

- 1. Prepare the LEP individual for the interpretation.**
  - **Introduce and explain the interpreter's role.** Use the interpreter to explain to the LEP individual what is happening. Mention that the interpreter will not have influence over any decisions or action that will be taken. S/he is only interpreting.
  - **Ask for answers in segments** so the interpreter can interpret accurately.
- 2. Ensure that the parties understand each other.** Consider asking a question that requires more than a "yes" or "no" answer. Try a simple question like "what happened?" or "how can I assist you today?"
- 3. Be brief, explicit, and basic.** If your sentences are too long or you speak at length it may compromise the effectiveness of the interpretation.
  - **Speak in segments** of one or two sentences at a time. Ask questions one at a time.
  - **Avoid statements disguised as questions.**
  - **Do not use double negatives** (e.g., "you didn't say you wouldn't go there, did you?")
  - **Pause** to alert the interpreter that it is time to interpret and allow time to deliver your message. (Does not apply to simultaneous interpretation.)
- 4. Speak clearly and naturally** at your normal volume and moderate pace. Speak more slowly if needed.
- 5. Maintain eye contact with the interviewee** whether the interpreter is in-person or on the phone.
- 6. Speak directly to the LEP individual** using the first person. You and the LEP individual should speak to one another as if the interpreter is not there. Say "Do you have ...?" rather than "Ask him if he has ...."
- 7. Be patient and avoid interrupting during the interpretation.** Allow the interpreter the time necessary to relay your messages and questions.
- 8. Do not have side conversations with the interpreter** and avoid long conversations with other English speaking individuals in the absence of an interpreter.
- 9. Interrupt if the interpreter and interviewee appear to be having a side conversation or appear confused.**
  - Do not expect the interpreter to fill in the blanks.
  - Ask that everything be interpreted for you.
  - Ask for clarification on what is being discussed to help resolve any interpretation problems. Rephrase questions, if needed. You may need to ask the same question several ways before eliciting a response.
  - Remind the interpreter of his/her neutral role.
- 10. If you need to read prepared text** (e.g. on a form the person is being asked to sign), be careful not to read too fast. Consider providing any significant written text to the interpreter in advance.
- 11. Avoid jargon or technical terms without explaining them.** Choose your words carefully. Avoid or explain slang, idioms, acronyms, or technical terms. Provide examples if they are needed to explain a term. Clarify specialized vocabulary. For example, start by saying, "The interpreter and I will first be discussing some special language so that s/he can better interpret for you."
- 12. Never ask for the interpreter's opinion.** The interpreter should never be allowed to express a personal opinion as it might bias or influence the interpretation.

**Finally, attempt to verify that the LEP individual understands.** Do not assume that a LEP individual understands you through the interpreter. Verifying interviewee understanding is especially important when discussing actions to be taken. For example, you can test understanding by asking the interviewee to repeat back what you have explained.



# Effective Communication with Persons who are Limited English Proficient

## Definitions and Different Modes of Interpretation

An **interpreter** listens to a communication in one language and orally converts to another language while retaining the same meaning. Professional interpreters are required to adhere to a **code of ethics** emphasizing confidentiality; impartiality; accuracy; avoidance of a conflict of interest; abstinence from communication with the LEP person beyond that which is necessary to carry out professional duties; and not adding to, editing, summarizing, or embellishing the LEP person's statements.

A **translator** replaces written text from one language into an equivalent written text in another language.

**Bilingual** individuals have the ability to use two languages. A bilingual person can learn to become a translator or an interpreter, but is not automatically so qualified by virtue of his or her language abilities. Similarly, a bilingual person may be fluent and well-suited to having direct monolingual conversations (e.g., Spanish to Spanish or English to English conversations) but may not be skilled at interpreting (conversion of one language to another).

**Literal conversion** from English to other languages can be confusing because many words and phrases do not have a non-English equivalent. Indeed, one of the governing principles of competent language services is “meaning for meaning” rather than “word for word.”

**Consecutive Interpretation** – The speaker (interviewer, official, etc.) makes a statement or asks a question, pauses, and then the interpreter renders what was said in the LEP person's first language.

**Simultaneous Interpretation** – The individual (interviewer, official, etc.) speaks in one language, while an interpreter simultaneously interprets what is being said into the LEP person's first language. Due to the high level of concentration needed, these interpreters often work in pairs and relieve one another every 20-30 minutes.

**Sight Translation** – On-the-spot oral translation of a document. There may be risks associated with sight translation of documents that provide legal notice or require consent due to the potentially higher error rate associated with the lack of preparation by the translator.

## Using Bilingual Personnel

If bilingual personnel are used as interpreters they should be qualified to do so. Consider whether personnel have:

- Demonstrated proficiency in accurately communicating in English and the other language;
- Ongoing training and assessment of the skills and ethics associated with interpretation;
- Knowledge of the ethical issues of interpretation such that interpretation is done accurately, impartially, confidentially, and without embellishment; and
- No conflicts of interest between their role as an interpreter and as an employee.

Competency to interpret does not necessarily mean formal certification, but it is helpful.

## Sample Background Statement to Provide to an Interpreter

“I am an [employee/officer/agent] with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This will be an interview with an individual who is being questioned for an investigation. I will need to obtain a clear statement of what happened, including names and dates. This may involve specialized law enforcement and immigration terminology or information of an explicit nature. Due to the nature of the subject, before or during the interview, please identify and clarify any cultural issue about which you feel that I may be unaware. I may ask the same general question in several different ways. If you do not understand a term, please ask me for clarification immediately.

“Here are some of the terms that may need some explanation before we start.

[Insert terms that have been problematic in the past or that you suspect may be confusing to the interpreter.]

“To help you prepare, here is some background on the interviewee. Please notify me if you see any potential conflict of interest.”

[Provide background on the LEP individual, if known, including: country and region/city of origin, education and literacy level, and any relevant additional information.]