

Working with Interpreters

Many of NIJC's pro bono cases require the use of an interpreter. Below are a few basic tips to consider while engaging with an interpreter. For more information and guidance, please see NIJC's webinar on working with an interpreter, [available here](#).

Before the appointment

1. Find an interpreter

NIJC recommends NOT using family members as the primary interpreter, as this may compromise objectivity and confidentiality. The following resources can help identify appropriate interpreters:

- Other attorneys or support staff
- Community organizations
- University foreign language programs
- Fee-based services

2. Brief the interpreter prior to the client meeting.

To facilitate communication, inform the interpreter on the who, why and what of the anticipated conversation. Briefing the interpreter on sensitive topics will allow the interpreter to prepare the most appropriate tone. This is also the time to clarify any technical terms or unique phrases that may be used.

3. Clarify the roles.

Clarify with the interpreter and the client that the conversation is between the attorney and the client. An interpreter is a neutral presence that transfers words and meanings; the interpreter is not supposed to be involved in the conversation. The interpreter should not conduct the interview. An interpreter should avoid assuming answers or clarifying in their own words. It may be necessary to ask the interpreter to not change or alter any part of the conversation. This will help both parties know that effective communication is happening.

4. Allow time for interpretation.

Interpretation can almost double the time of a meeting. Plan ahead and allow time for mis-interpretation, repetition, clarification. Time is important to ensure comprehension.

5. Be aware of cultural factors and body language.

Be aware of potential cultural or linguistic (dialectal) differences. For example, some languages speak more directly while others frequently use passive voice. ***Arrange for gender and/or age appropriate interpreters***, where possible. Even though you may not understand the words, body language and facial expressions can communicate misunderstandings or frustrations. Be sure to clarify as necessary.

During the appointment

1. Introduce a new interpreter.

All new interpreters should sign a confidentiality statement. Remind all participants of confidentiality. Introduce the interpreter to the client. Allowing a few minutes for small talk will determine any issues with comprehension between the interpreter and client. Regional differences in the same language can inhibit mutual understanding.

2. Speak clearly and in a normal tone; a bit slower may help.

To ensure clarity and accuracy in communication, speak clearly and intentionally. Pausing between and speaking in shorter phrases will help the efficiency of the interpreter.

3. Avoid metaphors, slang, acronyms and idiomatic expressions.

Cultural phrases may not translate well into other languages. Use simple and concise wording to make the interpretation smoother.

4. Be aware of the length of phrases and pauses.

Allow the interpreter to interpret the whole phrase, avoid interruptions. Shorter phrases are easier to translate. Pauses can help benchmark points in a conversation. It is also important to note that certain languages are structured differently, allow space for that and try to avoid assuming you know what is coming next.

5. Speak directly to the client, not to the interpreter.

In an in-person meeting, avoid speaking to the interpreter, instead speak directly to the client. Sometimes clients may demonstrate more comfort with the person that speaks their language; gently encourage the client to speak to you and not the interpreter. Discourage side conversations between the interpreter and client.

6. Only one person speaks at a time.

Allowing only one person to speak, with minimal interruptions, will ensure the most accurate interpretation, flow of conversation and minimize the need for repeating.

7. Address misunderstandings.

- **In interpretation:** In the event the interpreter does not understand either party, the interpreter should state that she will clarify the word or phrase. If you or the client do not understand the interpreter, do not hesitate to end the session and find another interpreter.
- **Substantive:** If the client is not understanding what you are trying to communicate, rephrase the question or idea. Avoid asking the interpreter to clarify with the client.

8. Ending the session.

Ask the client if there are any questions or clarifications. Confirm with them the next steps.