



Getting Legal Assistance in Your Language: Language Access Rights at Legal Aid Offices

Legal aid offices (also called legal services) are not-for-profit agencies that provide free legal help to people who cannot afford to hire a lawyer. Many legal aid offices throughout the United States receive money from the U.S. government and therefore must provide language access services to people who do not speak English well.

What are language access services?

Language access services include a free interpreter and free translation of important documents. An agency cannot force you to provide your own interpreter (such as a friend or family member) or ask you to pay for an interpreter or translation provided by the agency.

What is an interpreter?

An interpreter is a person who helps people talk to each other when they don't speak the same language. An interpreter can work in person or over the phone.

What is translation of documents?

Translation of documents means changing documents from one language into another language. Legal services offices should translate important documents such as notices and letters so you can understand what happened in your case.

Where am I entitled to language access services?

If you do not speak English well, you are entitled to language access services at legal services offices that receive money from the U.S. government.

About this Guide

This guide was created by the Legal Aid Society of Northeastern New York in partnership with the New York LawHelp Consortium and Pro Bono Net, with support from the Legal Services Corporation Technology Initiative Grant program.

To read all of the guides in this series, visit LawHelpNC.org or LawHelp.org

How do I know which offices receive money from the U.S. government?

Look for the words:

- Legal Services Corporation (also called LSC)
- U.S. Department of Justice (also called DOJ)
- Department of Health and Human Services (also called HHS)
- Department of Housing and Urban Development (also called HUD)
- Social Security Administration (SSA)
- Department of Labor (DOL)

Legal aid offices that receive money from the Legal Services Corporation must provide language access services. Similarly, offices that receive funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, the Department of Health and Human Services or the Department of Housing and Urban Development to help domestic violence victims, the homeless or foreclosure victims must also provide language access services.

I was not provided with services in my own language. How do I file a complaint?

If you were not provided with services in your own language, you may have a claim for national origin discrimination.

To file a complaint, contact:

Federal Coordination and Compliance Section - NWB
Civil Rights Division
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20530
(888) 848-5306 - English and Spanish (Inglés y Español)
(202) 307-2222 (voice)
(202) 307-2678 (TDD)
www.justice.gov/crt/about/cor/complaint.php

Each agency may also have a way to complain about not receiving services in your primary language. Check the agency's website for how to file a complaint.

For More Information

Looking for more information on this topic? Visit LawHelpNC.org to find other self-help resources and information about free and low-cost legal aid providers in your area.

Disclaimer

This guide was prepared for general information purposes only. The information it contains is not legal advice. Legal advice is dependent upon the specific circumstances of each situation. Also, the law may vary from state to state. Some information in this guide may not be correct for your state. To find local resources, visit LawHelpNC.org.