



Working with an Interpreter in a Legal Setting

Many lawyers and legal aid offices (also called legal services) use interpreters to talk to people who do not speak English well. How to best work with an interpreter is explained below.

What is an interpreter?

When people speak different languages, an interpreter helps them talk to each other. An interpreter can work in person or over the phone.

Is what I say to the interpreter confidential?

If your interpreter works for your lawyer or someone else who works in a legal office, everything you say to the interpreter is confidential, which means that it is not shared with anyone outside of the legal office. You have the right to confirm that the interpreter is working under a confidentiality agreement. If you know the interpreter and do not feel comfortable working with him or her, explain that to your lawyer before you begin and ask for an interpreter that you do not know. As a general rule, do not use a family member or friend as an interpreter.

How should I speak when using an interpreter?

The interpreter is there to help you speak with your lawyer. It will help if you remember to:

- Talk to your lawyer, not the interpreter.
- Speak clearly.
- Give the interpreter time to interpret -- stop speaking after a few sentences or after important details. This gives the interpreter time to tell the lawyer what you are saying.
- If you have worked with an interpreter in your lawyer's office and you thought they did a good job, ask to work with them again when you return.

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.

The interpreter did not tell the lawyer everything I said. Is this a problem?

Yes. The interpreter should tell the lawyer all the words you say exactly as you say them. The interpreter should not shorten, explain or summarize what you say. Often, the details are important to the lawyer. It's important to give the interpreter time to talk.

I do not understand the lawyer's question. What should I do?

If you do not understand the lawyer's question, then tell your lawyer "I do not understand." You can ask the lawyer to ask the question in a different way. The interpreter should not explain the meaning of the lawyer's word or question. It is the lawyer's job to do so.

The interpreter told me that I don't have a strong legal case. Is this true?

An interpreter should not give his or her opinion on your case. And, an interpreter should not give you legal advice. If you have a question about your case, you should ask your lawyer.

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