

# Working with interpreters

by Cecilia Barassi-Rubio, guest contributor

Working effectively with interpreters ensures people from non-English speaking backgrounds' access to available services. Working with interpreters also assists service providers in understanding the needs of the people accessing their services to ensure services are adequate in meeting identified needs. Furthermore, the practice of working with interpreters is essential to ensure accessible and equitable service delivery, considering that in Queensland, around 1 in 3 people were born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas.

The following information is intended as a basic guide to support best practice in cross-cultural service provision. This guide has been informed by the extensive experience of IWSS' staff<sup>1</sup> in working with interpreters and resources from Department of Communities and Queensland Health. (*Refer to the list of resources, on page 16, or to your funding body's guidelines for more details*).

It is important to remember that when engaging an interpreter, the meeting/interview is between you and the person accessing the service. The interpreter's role is to facilitate communication and to help you in your role.

## Who pays for interpreters?

Non-government organisations (NGOs) funded by the Department of Communities and Queensland Health are provided free access to interpreting services. To ensure your organisation is eligible to access free interpreting services, contact your funding body or visit their website for more details.

## How to access an interpreter?

An interpreter can be accessed over the telephone (telephone interpreting) or in person (on-site interpreting). If the person accessing the service expresses concern that they may be known to the interpreter, then ensure that you request an interstate telephone interpreter or an on-site interpreter who is not known to the person.

## How do you know when an interpreter is required?

Making a decision about engaging an interpreter should be based on fact rather than assumption. For instance, a person may have a reasonable level of conversational English but may find it difficult to understand more abstract information such as giving consent to share their information with other service providers. Some people will let you know if they require an interpreter (e.g. by giving you the name of the language or by showing you the 'I need an interpreter' card.

If you are not sure if an interpreter needs to be engaged you can try the following:

- ask one or two open ended questions (instead of questions that require a 'yes' or 'no' answer). Avoid asking questions that are familiar to the person such as 'where do you live'?
- ask the person to explain in their own words their understanding of a statement you make.

## On-site interpreting

Fill in the relevant booking form, including the client code (if your organisation is exempt), the agency's contact details, date and place of the interview, approximate length of time the interpreter is required (allow additional time for the interview as it can generally take twice as long when an interpreter is required) and include any special requirements such as the gender of the interpreter.

Fax the booking form with as much notice as possible before the scheduled interview. It is wise to contact the interpreting provider to seek advice on their booking policy. If you have not received confirmation from the interpreting service, contact them before the day of the appointment.

## Telephone interpreting

You may need to use telephone interpreting when a person accessing your service requires an interpreter to talk to you. You can ring the interpreting service provider (as per agreement with your funding body) to access immediate interpreting services. You can keep the name of the person accessing the service confidential if the nature of your work deems it necessary.

Tell the operator:-

- Your contact details, including client code (if exempt);
- The language or dialect required;
- Phone number of the person if you need to ring them.

Once the interpreter is on the line:-

- Tell the interpreter about the purpose of the interview and approximate duration;
- Inform the interpreter about the phone equipment you are using and whether the person is with you or on the telephone.

## The process for working with the interpreter (telephone or on-site interpreting)

If you are using either telephone or on-site interpreting, always ensure you arrange a private area for the interview. If the interview is on-site, ensure the seating arrangement is adequate, e.g. form a triangle to ensure verbal and non-verbal cues are not missed (*refer to pages 34 and 35 of the Working with Interpreters Guidelines for further*

<sup>1</sup>The Immigrant Women's Support Service (IWSS) is a specialist domestic violence and sexual assault service providing support and crisis intervention services to women and their children from non-English speaking backgrounds through counselling, advocacy and ongoing support. IWSS is a community-based organisation funded by both Commonwealth and State governments and has been operating since 1986. IWSS is staffed by a team qualified in the social and behavioural sciences and administrative staff.

*details on the triangular seating arrangement*  
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If possible, before commencing the interview, brief the interpreter by providing some details about your organisation and the purpose of the interview/meeting.

At the start of the interview/meeting with an interpreter, introduce yourself and the interpreter to the person accessing the service. Explain your role and the role of the interpreter in the interview/meeting process. Information about the right to confidentiality should always be provided to the person accessing the service as well as information about the interpreters' Code of Ethics.

Make sure you state clearly the purpose of the interview (e.g. providing information about your service).

Allow time for the interpreter to interpret information, facts, etc and allow time for the person accessing the service to ask questions or seek clarification.

Communicate to the person accessing the service your understanding of what they have said to ensure accuracy.

Instructions need to be provided in a logical and sequential manner. It is good practice to ask the person to communicate their understanding of the instructions/information provided.

Always ask the person accessing the service if they have any questions and discuss whether a follow-up interview is required.

### **Before finalising the interview/meeting**

Make arrangements to book an interpreter for a follow-up interview if required. If the person accessing the service agrees, you can request the same interpreter for a follow-up interview/meeting.

### **After the interview/meeting**

It is advisable to debrief the interpreter after the interview/meeting, particularly when the meeting/interview involves sensitive information. It is also good practice to debrief the interpreter to give them feedback and to seek their feedback about the process.

Ensure there is appropriate documentation of the interview/meeting process. This could include the time, purpose and outcomes of the interview, and that an interpreter was engaged in the process. You can also record the interpreting 'job number' for future reference.

### **Helpful hints**

- Speak in your normal tone of voice. For example, speaking too slow or too loud will not ensure a better understanding;

- Use concise and well constructed sentences;
- Direct all communication to the person accessing the service (e.g. Mrs Jones, please tell me how I can help you today' instead of 'Interpreter, please ask Mrs Jones how I can help her today');
- Avoid jargon and slang;
- Always ask the person what is the language they speak. Never rely on physical appearance or accent to identify the language spoken by the person.

### **A final word**

Working with an interpreter may be initially more time or resource intensive; however the benefits exceed the potential time and costs associated with miscommunication. Furthermore, the benefit of being able to communicate with people accessing your service includes the ability to provide services in a non-discriminatory and inclusive manner.

### **Resources**

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*Department of Communities*  
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*Diversity Figures*  
<http://www.multicultural.qld.gov.au/services-resources/documents/maq-diversity-figures-brochure-v8-notables.pdf>

## **Advocating for better access to interpreting services in Queensland**

The Queensland Accessing Interpreters Working Group (QAIWG) was formed in 2008 to advocate for language service provision that is responsive to the needs of Queensland's Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities.

QAIWG launched a report 'A Matter of Interpretation' based on 72 case studies from across Queensland which identified that people with limited English proficiency skills do not have equitable access to information and services. It also highlighted the systemic and practice issues impacting on CALD communities' access to interpreting and translating services in Qld.

This year, QAIWG began collating evidence to inform a follow up report due to be released late 2011. It is anticipated that the follow up report will identify the ongoing and emerging barriers to accessing language services by people from CALD communities. QAIWG is collaborating with key stakeholders in the development of strategies to minimise and remove those barriers through policy development and practice improvement.

To provide your support, contact Lisa Toh, QCOSS Multicultural Policy Officer at [lisat@qco.org.au](mailto:lisat@qco.org.au).

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