

WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING CASES¹

Trained, qualified interpreters should be provided to every victim who does not speak English very well. There are some key considerations when identifying and selecting an interpreter. Interpreters should be **neutral**. Never use another victim, family, or someone who has a relationship with the victim. Interpreters should have a complete grasp of the two languages they are interpreting, as well as training in the skill of interpreting. Make sure that the interpreter does not have ties to the trafficker, either in the United States or in the home country, to the victim, or to anyone else involved in the case. A victim may prefer an interpreter of the same or different gender, or from the same or a different cultural or religious community. Victims may not trust interpreters to maintain confidentiality and may prefer a telephonic interpreter who is not able to see the victim or who may be from a distant location.

One critical step in working with interpreters is making sure to meet with the interpreter before conducting an interview. Prepare an interpreter for the potential of asking difficult questions. Questions that get to the heart of exploitation are often very difficult, invasive, and probing; it is important to prepare the interpreter for the topics that may be covered and ensuring they can handle it. The importance of confidentiality should be reviewed with the interpreter before the interview and then described at the beginning of the interview, right after introducing the interpreter to the victim.

The interpreter can also be a valuable cultural resource to the interviewer. Take the time to ask the interpreter to explain any particularly relevant cultural dynamics that may impact communication with the victim. Other important ground rules to establish between the interpreter and the interviewer include:

- Interpreter interprets exactly what the interviewer states and what the victim states. No summaries or euphemisms. No elaborating beyond what either the interviewer or the victim states.
- No side conversations or chatter that is not interpreted. The interpreter is solely a conduit for communicating between the interviewer and the victim. If the victim asks the interpreter a question, she/he is to interpret that question to the interviewer and let the interviewer respond, interpreting that response.
- If the interpreter needs to clarify the victim's response, she/he will stop the conversation and explain to the interviewer what needs clarification and get the interviewer to ask clarifying questions that the interpreter then interprets.
- Schedule time for a break if the interview is expected to last more than an hour. Interpreting is an intense and tiring activity. Accuracy will degrade over time. Interpreters need breaks, and victims are likely to appreciate them as well.

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime (OVC), "Human Trafficking Task Force E-Guide, "Working with Interpreters," accessed October 30, 2021, <https://www.ovcttac.gov/taskforceguide/eguide/5-building-strong-cases/53-victim-interview-preparation/working-with-interpreters/>