

Interpreters for People with Limited English Proficiency

Should I read this publication?

Yes, if:

- You live in Washington
- English is not your first language
- You have trouble speaking or understanding English easily

Help may be available. Interpreters are often able to help people like you, with limited English skills (“Limited English Proficiency”, or “LEP”), deal with business or personal issues.

What is an interpreter?

An interpreter transfers one language, presented *orally*, to another.

How can an interpreter help me?

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- ❖ An interpreter **cannot** offer you advice or an opinion about your situation.
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When you need to understand exactly what is going on, or you need to be understood, an interpreter can be very important. When you go to see a doctor, a lawyer, or a government agency, a skilled interpreter can help ensure effective communication.

A skilled interpreter can convey all the important details about your situation. S/he will understand the words that a doctor or lawyer, for instance, says and will interpret them to you.

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- ❖ If you use a skilled interpreter instead of your child or a friend you will not have to share private, personal information, like medical symptoms or the amount of your debts, with your child or friend.
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What is a “certified” interpreter?

An interpreter can receive “**certification**” from the State of Washington or the federal government to interpret a certain language. This means the interpreter has a high level of skill. Some interpreters get certification to work in medical settings, legal settings, or social service settings. A certified interpreter has demonstrated an understanding of the interpreter’s role and interpreter ethics.

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- ❖ Certification exams are not available in all languages.
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Interpreters can also be “qualified” by answering a series of questions designed to understand the interpreter’s language skills, experience, training, and understanding of the code of conduct.

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- ❖ Your best choice is usually a certified interpreter.
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Certified interpreters must follow a Code of Conduct requiring them to:

- Interpret accurately
- keep confidential the materials they interpret/translate
- be courteous and professional
- not take sides if their work involves disputes

Any certified or uncertified interpreter must also follow certain ethical standards:

- to interpret everything you say, without explaining, summarizing, or adding details
- to tell everyone if s/he is having trouble interpreting, for example because of differences in dialect
- to tell everyone if s/he knows you or another person in the interpreted setting

When should I use a certified or qualified interpreter?

You should use a certified or qualified interpreter when it is important for you to understand what is going on, in words that make sense to you. Use that interpreter, too, when it is important that the person you are talking to understands you. Here are some **examples**:

- You are seeing a doctor or medical professional.
- You have been served with legal papers that might affect your legal rights, and need to figure out what to do.

- You are meeting with a social worker to discuss your application for Social Security Disability benefits.
- You are meeting with your child's school about a disciplinary action, an IEP or special education meeting, or other important school events.

How do I know an interpreter is skilled?

Ask:

- What training do you have as an interpreter?
- What work have you done as an interpreter? How long? How many clients have you had?
- What interpreting certifications do you have, and what are they?
- What dialects of my language are you able to interpret?

Even if you do not speak English well, you can tell if your interpreter is doing a good job. You should understand what your interpreter says to you in your first language. You can look for clues:

- The interpreter should use the first person form, not third person, when interpreting someone else's comments to you (If your doctor says "I see Juan's temperature is high," the interpreter should **not** say "He sees Juan's temperature is high").
- The interpreter should refer to himself as "the interpreter," not "I."

- The interpreter should take notes during the conversation. (The interpretation is more likely to be accurate.)
- The interpreter should ask you to pause in the middle of a very long sentence. (Each portion will be short enough to interpret accurately.)
- The interpreter should tell you when s/he does not understand something you are saying.

Your interpreter may **not** be skilled if you see or hear these things:

- The interpreter's version of what you say, or is said to you, is much shorter than the original version.
- The interpreter has a conversation with someone else involved in your meeting/hearing without explaining to you what the conversation is about.
- The interpreter's facial expression or body language does not show you respect.

If your interpreter appears unskilled based on these clues, ask him/her to correct the problems you see, or ask for another interpreter.

Are there things I can do to better communicate through an interpreter?

Yes:

- Pause at the end of your sentences. Make sure the interpreter has a chance to interpret before you move on.
- Do not interrupt while the interpreter is speaking.

- If you do not understand a question or a comment, ask for an explanation.
- If you do not know the meaning of a word or phrase, ask for a definition.
- If you do not understand why you are being asked a particular question, ask why.
- If you do not understand why you are being asked to do something, ask why. Explain what you think is a better alternative.

How can I get an interpreter?

Many state and federal agencies will provide professional interpreters to LEP people. So will many groups that get any assistance from the federal government. In Washington, you can usually get a professional interpreter when you are dealing with a service provider, such as:

- hospitals
- public and private colleges
- public school districts
- federal and state government agencies
- local housing authorities
- many city and county agencies
- community organizations
- federal, state, and local courts, for criminal and civil court hearings and some settlement conferences – including juvenile court, diversion and youth court, and domestic violence or sexual assault protection order hearings

- administrative hearings (hearings at government agencies like the Division of Child Support and Social Security)
- prosecuting attorneys
- law enforcement officers (police, sheriffs)
- departments of correction (jail, prison)
- some drug rehabilitation and domestic violence programs
- 911 and other fire, emergency and crisis intervention services
- 1-888-201-1014 weekdays from 9:15 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. if you live outside King County.

If you need an interpreter, you must ask the people you are dealing with for this service so as soon as possible. This will give the agency time to find you a qualified interpreter.

How much will the interpreter cost?

Most federal, state, and local agencies will provide free interpreter services. The responsibility for the agency or provider to pay for a spoken language interpreter can depend on the setting and several state and federal laws impact this determination, including RCW 2.43, RCW 49.60, and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It is best to ask for a free interpreter and work with the provider to ensure access to the services is available.

What if an agency or court refuses to provide or pay for an interpreter?

Call CLEAR (Northwest Justice Project) for advice:

- 211 weekdays from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. if you live in King County

If your complaint is about a federal agency, you may have to send a letter of complaint to the office of civil rights for that agency. If your complaint is about a group receiving federal funding, your letter should go to the office of civil rights at the federal agency that provides those funds. You can find most of these addresses at

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/about/offices/ocr.htm>

I have gotten a document written in English. What if I cannot understand it?

Many agencies and courts have prepared versions of standard documents in languages other than English. If you cannot read a document in English, ask if a version written in your language is available. If not, ask if the agency or court will provide an interpreter to sight translate the document for you into a language you understand.

Where can I get more information?

For an explanation of LEP services available when you use DSHS programs and services, see Washington State Administrative Code Sections for Department of Health and Human Services: [WAC Title 388, Chapter 271](#).

For explanations of LEP services offered in Washington State Courts, see Revised Code of Washington State: [RCW 2.43.010 through .090](#).

You may want to reach out to the court clerk's office to ask about the process for requesting interpreter services for that particular court.

For interpreter services in **King County Superior Court:**

Online:

www.kingcounty.gov/courts/SuperiorCourt/InterpreterSrv.aspx

Phone: 206-477-1415

For interpreter services in **King County District Court:**

Phone: 206- 477-1760

Email:

InterpreterCoordinator.KCDC@kingcounty.gov

For interpreter services in **Pierce County Superior Court, District Court and Juvenile Court:**

Phone: 253-798-6091

Email: Supcrtinterpret@co.pierce.wa.us

For interpreter services in **Snohomish County Superior Court:**

Phone: 425-388-3893

Email: SSCInterpreterSupport@snoco.org

For interpreter services in **Snohomish County District Court or Juvenile Court:**

Phone: 425-388-3893

Email: sdciinterpretersupport@snoco.org

For interpreter services in **Spokane County Superior Court:**

Phone: 509-477-5790 or 509-477-4402

For interpreter services in **Yakima County Superior Court:**

Contact the Yakima County Superior Court Clerk's Office in person, located at 128 North Second Street, Yakima, WA 98901

This publication provides general information concerning your rights and responsibilities. It is not intended as a substitute for specific legal advice.

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