

## Communicating Through an Interpreter

Some clients will require a language or sign language interpreter. At no cost to parties or witnesses, OAH arranges for qualified sign and language interpreters to serve during the hearing. You need an interpreter to communicate with your client before and after the hearing. For example, using an interpreter when you and your client talk about the case, review case documents, review the judge's order, and prepare a petition for review. This document provides practical tips for successful communication when using an interpreter. You can find information in other training materials about how to arrange for an interpreter at no cost to you or the party. Please speak to your client or the individual who needs the interpreter just as you would speak to any other person. For example, to introduce yourself you may say, "Hello, my name is Jim." You should not say to the interpreter, "Tell him my name is Jim."

Some other tips for effective communication may include:

- Allow the interpreter to review the documents you plan to discuss, to become familiar with names, dates, and technical vocabulary.
- Allow the interpreter to talk briefly with your client, for the limited purpose of ensuring the understanding of accents, dialect or pronunciation differences
- Encourage the interpreter to ask questions when uncertain of meaning of any word, concept or issue
- Encourage the interpreter to alert you to potential cultural misunderstandings that may come up
- Do not ask the interpreter to independently explain or restate anything said to your client.
- If in-person, arrange the seating so that you directly face your client.
- Speak directly to your client.
- Use plain, non-legal language
- Speak at an even pace in relatively short segments. 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.
- Be aware that some concepts you express may have no linguistic, or even conceptual, equivalent in other languages. The interpreter may take longer than your original speech.
  - For example, the Hmong Legal Glossary published by the Wisconsin Court Interpreter Program translates "Juvenile Court" as "Tsev Hais Plaub Rau Cov Menyuum Tsis Tau Hnub Nyoog."
- Avoid
  - Slang, figures of speech and regional colloquialisms.
    - If you say something is "a piece of cake," meaning it's simple or easy, the interpreter will need to find a similar colloquialism to reflect the concept. It would be better in the first instance to say it will be simple or easy.
  - Complicated sentence structure
  - Sentence fragments
  - Changing your idea in the middle of a sentence
  - Asking multiple questions at one time

- Agency acronyms or “bureaucratic speak” without an explanation in plain words
- Encourage a two-way communication. For example, ask your client:
  - Is there anything else you would like me to know?
  - Is there anything else you would like to know?
  - Do you have any questions for me?
- Be patient. Being a Suitable Representative across a language barrier or hearing impairment takes time. Time spent building a good rapport and clear communication will avoid wasted time and dangerous misunderstandings down the line.

In July 2017, the Washington Administrative Office of the Courts published a Deskbook on Language Access in Washington Courts. Appendix M, at pages 118-112, gives [Tips for Working with Telephonic, Video, and In-person Interpreters](#).

The examples of “Juvenile Court” and “piece of cake” were from the April/May 2018 publication of NWLawyer, in an article by attorney Katrin Johnson, titled [“Every Word Matters.”](#) Ms. Johnson serves on the Washington Supreme Court’s Interpreter Commission.