

Working with Interpreters in Alaska

By Barb Jacobs

Working with professionally trained interpreters is crucial to the safety of victims with limited English proficiency. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, agencies receiving federal funds must provide meaningful language access for people who are limited English proficient. In enabling conversation between two people who don't speak the same language, an interpreter does not act as an advocate. A professional interpreter is fluent in two or more languages, trained in the ethics and role of the interpreter, and knows legal and medical terminology. An advocate should know that a trained interpreter will follow a code of ethics.

There are ten canons in the code of professional responsibility for court interpreters:

- Accuracy and completeness
- Representation of qualifications
- Impartiality and avoidance of conflict of interest
- Professional demeanor
- Confidentiality
- Restriction of public comment
- Scope of practice
- Assessing and reporting impediments to performance
- Duty to report ethical violations
- Professional development

The Language Interpreter Center opened in 2007 and has provided interpreter training to over 200 bilingual Alaskans in 40 different languages. The interpreter training course includes:

- Interpreter ethics,
- Modes of interpreting
- Legal and medical terminology.

The Language Interpreter Center provides an interpreter referral service to service providers and workshops on the ethics and responsibilities of working with a professional interpreter.

A limited English proficient person may be able to converse with an advocate in English, but most times and especially under stressful situations it is crucial to have a trained interpreter. It is important for advocates to inform the interpreter ahead of time the nature of the interview. The interpreter will disclose any conflicts of interest and may withdraw from the interview. The interpreter does not give advice or an opinion and everything said will be interpreted. At the interview a trained interpreter will introduce herself and her role in keeping everything confidential and transparent. By having a trained interpreter who remains calm and respectful at the interview, the limited English proficient victim can speak in her first language, use words she naturally comes by and be able to communicate with more ease. The advocate will receive a more complete description of the victim's circumstances and statement. Advocates and service

providers who encounter people whose first language is not English might consider attending a workshop on working with interpreters to become familiar with the role of a professional interpreter.

Barb Jacobs has been the program manager of the Language Interpreter Center since 2007. The Language Interpreter Center is an innovative entity that provides interpreter training and interpreter services to Alaskans who are limited English proficient. Barb has worked in the education field for thirty years, most recently with the Anchorage School District as an assistant principal and previously as a counselor and teacher. She has a M.Ed. in Educational Leadership and another M.Ed. in Guidance and Counseling. She holds a professional counseling license through the State of Alaska.