

## Considerations for Working with an Interpreter

*Adapted from the Georgia SART Guide by Delia Lopez and Mariana Rodriguez, UMOS*

*The victim specific or cultural consideration section is designed to help SART members understand victims from diverse cultures to ensure all victims are served with respect regardless of their background. This section is intended to be a tool to help professionals; however, it is the responsibility of each SART member to integrate culturally relevant and responsive care into their services for victims. It is hoped that SARTs will utilize these considerations to increase their understanding of diversity and learn ways to serve victims with respect to their cultural background and identities. <sup>1</sup>*

Language barriers can interfere with a victim's ability to fully disclose their experience and/or share details of an assault. It is important to recognize that victims may not understand the questions being asked while being interviewed by law enforcement, healthcare providers, or other professionals. Therefore, providing an interpreter is required.

Working with an interpreter brings in an added dimension of complexity to the already complex process of working with victims. The interpreter's role in serving the victim is also complex as it is not limited to enabling the linguistic aspects of communication. For example, interpreters may provide information valuable to understanding the cultural context or framework of a victim's history. Specialized training for both interpreters and service providers working with refugees and individuals of ethnic minority populations is strongly recommended. Please use the following general considerations and guidelines as a starting point when working with victims who need interpreters.

### General Considerations

Factors that may potentially affect the interpreter/victim relationship include: membership in different or previously adversarial ethnic groups, gender differences, class differences, and/or age differences (\*e.g., younger person interpreting for an older person).

- When preparing to work with an interpreter for the first time, it is helpful to discuss skills, processes of interpretation, and expectations.
- Ask the victim which gender they prefer due to cultural or religious beliefs and/or potential history of sexual trauma.
- Spatial aspects between the victim, the interpreter, and the responding professional are important. Set up the chairs in a triangle so that each person can see each other clearly.

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<sup>1</sup> Georgia Sexual Assault Response Team Guide. 2021. [2021sartguidev2-final.pdf \(svrga.org\)](https://www.svrga.org/2021sartguidev2-final.pdf)

- Take time to observe the interaction between each person to build trust and rapport within the relationships.
- Allow for the victim to disclose and/or share what occurred in their own words, at their own pace, and their comfort level. The victim may need time to process the trauma and disclose what they can at that moment.
- Use short sentences so the interpreter can properly convey the content of the questions or statements.
- Always use clarifying questions or summarizing statements to assure a clear understanding of the victim's experience or statements.
- The interpreter should convey the meaning of statements back to the professional. However, depending upon what language is being interpreted, the interpreter may convey meaning rather than the entire translation.
- Victim advocates should not be used as interpreters for medical procedures, law enforcement reports/statements, or legal proceedings as this is not their role with the victim.

### **Before Hiring an Interpreter**

- Develop a pool of accessible, trained professional interpreters for the most common languages spoken in your community.
- Ask the interpreter if they have worked specifically with victims of sexual assault. Screen interpreters to determine their level of language skills, interpretation skills, knowledge of culture, sensitivity to mental health issues, understanding of the importance of confidentiality, and general service delivery of interpretation services (reliable, efficient, etc.) A good way to screen interpreters is to call before needing an interpreter and ask those questions about training, services, and experiences.
- There are not medical certified interpreters for all languages, only American Sign Language (ASL) has certified interpreters. All other language interpreters are required to go through comprehensive training for a certain number of hours designated by their agency. Again, ask the interpreter specific questions to determine knowledge and competency.

- With the interpreter, determine cultural background and languages that would be a good match for the interpreter’s skills, specific dialect, and person background.
- **When placing a call for an interpreter, ask for the interpreter’s name to ensure there is no conflict of interest (relative, friend, acquaintance, neighbor, etc.) or other concern for the victim. Do not share the victim’s name or information without their consent.**
- Inform the victim that interpreters are instructed not to introduce their own information; they should interpret only what is said by the victim and the provider.
- If using a hospital interpreter for the victim of a recent sexual assault who also wants to report to law enforcement, make sure to ask the interpreter if there are any agency policies against providing interpretation services for both the medical exam and the law enforcement interview. In some cases, the interpreter’s agency may request two payments if two separate parties are using the interpreter’s services. Alternatively, phone interpretation services can be used to avoid this issue. Interpreters may not feel comfortable providing interpretation services outside of their specialty (i.e., medical interpreter translating legal or law enforcement questions).
- A shared cultural background between the victim and interpreter may assist in effective, efficient communication; however, in some cases there may be limitations in discussing their victimization or situation with someone from their own community. Many individuals may fear the interpreter may not maintain confidentiality and, as a result, learns of their private information. Always ask the victim if the interpreter is a good fit to provide services and always work with the victim to find an interpreter who will provide the best means of open communication.

### **When Using an Interpreter**

Discuss the role of confidentiality and how it applies to each role (interpreter, victim, provider, etc.) Victims may wonder about possible connections between providers and interpreters so it may be helpful to address this openly.

Allow enough time for tasks, interviews, and services as they take longer when using an interpreter. Model speaking in a normal voice to the victim (not too slow, or too fast, or soft/loud). Talking in short sentences allows accurate interpretation. Ask one question at a time and decide on a convenient “stop signal” that everyone can understand and feel comfortable using. Expect the interpreter to take notes when issues become complicated. Expect that the interpreter may use a dictionary while interpreting to elaborate on a word that may not be translatable in the other language.

Repeat your statements using different words and terms to explain questions, information, and referrals.

When asking the interpreter to interpret a written document/brochure into spoken words, the professional (doctor, nurse, police officer, attorney, advocate) should read or say it in their own words and have the interpreter interpret (repeat) the document verbally by listening to the professional – not by reading the written document. It is challenging to have the interpreter read something they are not familiar with and try to interpret it into spoken words.

Always use words, not gestures, to convey meaning.

Take time to explain that interpreters need words to give the most accurate interpretation of what the victim wishes to say.

To ensure good communication, take time to introduce all the people involved and explain each person's role. Explain the role of the leading professional (medical personnel, law enforcement, advocate, etc.) in relation to the other professionals at the agency. When introducing the interpreter, it may be helpful to say, "the interpreter is here to help communicate your needs and concerns with me, so I can better understand and provide you with support or information that can help you make the choices that you believe are best for you."

Have everyone (victim, professionals, interpreter) speak directly to each other, not to the interpreter. Make sure the interpreter speaks to all people in the first person. Make sure to look at the victim while you are speaking to them and maintain eye contact when the victim or interpreter speaks.

Let the victim know that interpreters are included in the agency's confidentiality agreement (if not, confidentiality laws should be understood before including an interpreter.) Make it clear which information will not be shared outside the agency and inform victims of the information that would be shared (e.g., HIPAA, mandated reporting, etc.) When a release of information is issued, inform the victim of its purpose for sharing information outside of the agency.

Explain the roles of all people involved. It is very important to address the issue of interpreter confidentiality and how the interpreter and victim will handle future interactions within the community; typically, it is at the victim's discretion whether the victim will interact with the interpreter.

Look for nonverbal cues including behaviors, facial expressions, and always clarify if words do not match nonverbal cues (i.e., distressing facial expressions that have not been interpreted) as nonverbal cues are usually the only means of direct communication between you and the victim. Be conscious of ethnicity, age, class, or disability differences between the victim and the interpreter. Avoid using slang, technical words, or acronyms that may be difficult to interpret or understand. Plan what you want to say ahead of time.

Always check to see if messages and information is understood. Ask clarifying questions and/or ask the interpreter to repeat statements.

Encourage the interpreter to tell you when she/he is having difficulty interpreting something. Give the interpreter time to interpret concepts; one word can require a lengthy explanation in either direction if the concept does not exist in other languages.

### **After Using an Interpreter**

Debrief any communication problems; the best cross-cultural learning for both service providers and interpreters often occurs through immediate feedback using specific situations as learning opportunities.

Ask the interpreter if there was anything that reflected lack of understanding of the victim's culture, or if the interpreter had any difficulty interpreting. This feedback will build a stable, good working relationship between the provider and interpreter.

If there are complications with the interpreter, by their feedback, it may be helpful to follow-up with the victim and a different interpreter to get the perspective from the victim on how the services went for them. This follow-up and open communication will build trust with the victim and the provider for future communications.

**Do not ask the interpreter for their opinion after the victim leaves.** An example of this would be to ask, "What do you think?" or "Do you believe them?"

Keep in mind that each time the interpreter works with the victim (e.g., in court, at the hospital, making a report to law enforcement) the information provided by the victim cannot be shared with other professionals. Therefore, the professional should not ask for other information that the interpreter may know about the victim from past contact.

### **Additional Considerations**

It may not always be obvious whether a victim needs an interpreter. If an interpreter is needed, determine in what situations, as it may only be needed for legal representation or reading complex documents.

If victims seem to latch onto nouns in sentences but are unable to understand complex concepts, the victim may be able to speak English but not read or complete important documents. Providing an interpreter to translate documents in the victim's language would be required.

Discuss with victims whether they would feel more comfortable to convey thoughts, feelings, and emotional experiences in their first language. Always offer phone interpreters as an alternative to in-person if the victim prefers.

There are not medical certified interpreters for all languages, only American Sign Language (ASL) has certified interpreters. All other language interpreters are required to

go through comprehensive training for a certain number of hours designated by their agency. Ask the interpreter specific questions to determine knowledge and competency.

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