



# Interpretation: Best Practices for Your Staff

Interpretation is the act of translating **oral or signed** communication from one language to another language in spoken or signed form.

## Different forms of interpretation

- **Telephonic interpretation** involves using a telephone to call an interpreter to verbally translate language in real-time.
- **In-person interpreters** meet in person with the individual whose language is being verbally translated.
- **American Sign Language interpreters or Video Remote Interpreting (“VRI”)** is for use with individuals who are deaf or hearing impaired, involves viewing language in sign language and verbally translating it into another language (or vice versa).
- **Use of multilingual staff** within your organization who are able to provide on-the-spot assistance with interpretation. Note that multilingual staff often are not professionally trained in interpretation and may not be qualified to provide extensive interpretation assistance.

## How would I typically identify that someone has limited English proficiency (is an LEP Individual) and may need an interpreter?

Please don't assume that someone needs an interpreter just because they have an accent or were born outside of the U.S. Some indicators they may benefit from an interpreter:

- The individual may explicitly request an interpreter.
- You ask the individual if they would like an interpreter and they respond affirmatively;
- The person self-identifies as needing assistance (e.g., “I don't speak English”).
- During the interaction, you believe that the individual doesn't speak and understand English well enough to effectively participate in the conversation or fully understand questions and answer them without difficulty.

## How do I know what language the person needs interpretation in?

The employee will likely self-identify their language of preference. If it's unclear, it's recommended to hang throughout your workplace some sort of “point to your language” poster, which is an effective tool for someone to point to and identify the language the person speaks. Most interpreter services companies you work with will provide you with a similar poster that can be hung throughout the workplace. See a sample poster at [DHHS Interpreter Sign link](#)

## What is better - telephonic or in-person interpretation?

There are pluses and minuses of both. Telephonic interpretation is typically less expensive and immediately accessible. However, such interpretations often miss such critical nuances as body language and tone of voice.

In-person interpretation may be beneficial for longer and/or more sensitive conversations. Allow yourselves a few days to obtain an in-person interpreter.

## How do I find an interpreter?

- There are many different interpreters and interpreter services companies in Maine and the DHC does not endorse any particular vendor. Below is a non-exhaustive list of several Maine-based interpreter services companies:
  - **In-person:** Catholic Charities Maine Language Partners, Interpret Maine, City of Portland Minority Health Program; Maine Language Connect, and [Maine Department of Education](#) resources
  - **Telephonic interpreters:** Language Line and Maine Department of Education resources linked to above
  - **Sign language interpreters:** [Certified Interpreting](#), Pine Tree Society, [Maine DOL's listed agencies](#), and [Maine DOL's list of legally qualified sign language interpreters](#)

*\*Please note that this document is not intended to provide legal advice. If you have any questions as to whether your internal policies and procedures are compliant with local, state, or federal law, we encourage you to seek legal advice.*



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## Can't I just rely on Google Translate for Interpretation needs?

Google Translate is helpful in a pinch getting language translated from one language to another but translates literally, which means the nuances, idioms, and cultural reflections of the language being translated can be literally lost in translation!

## Best Practices for Working with an In-Person Interpreter

- When speaking to a person with an interpreter present, address and maintain eye contact with the person whose words are being interpreted, not the interpreter.
- Speak slowly and clearly in a normal tone of voice.
- Use simple vocabulary to express your meaning and avoid using idiomatic expressions (i.e., "on the same page").
- Ask one question at a time and allow the individual time to respond.
- Listen without interrupting.
- Let the interpreter stop and get clarification when necessary.
- If you are concerned with the accuracy of the interpretation, ask the interpreter to interpret what was said back to you.
- Interpreters are expected to maintain confidentiality and impartiality related to all information conveyed. The interpreter's role is not to be an advocate for the person.
- Don't say anything you don't want to be interpreted because everything said will be interpreted
- Be prepared to repeat yourself in different words if your message isn't understood
- If you think the person didn't understand your message, double-check if they understood by asking, "Tell me what you understand," or another similar question or statement.
- Encourage the person to ask questions.

Check out this great [video](#) that demonstrates some of the best (and not so great!) practices.

## Moving from Interpretation to Empowerment

Many employers are investing in their staff's ability to improve their English language skills during the workday, which ultimately will result in empowered staff who have a reduced need for interpretation. English proficiency is one of the most significant keys to success for immigrants in the United States.

How can you support your staff in improving their English language skills while at work? Here are a few ideas:

- Contact the [Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center](#) to learn more about your staff participating in its iEnglish Project that integrates English language learning with technology, enabling a tailored curriculum and a self-paced learning platform.
- Contact your local Adult Education program to see if ESL classes could be provided on-site to staff.
- Contact [Midcoast Literacy](#) to learn about their one-on-one tutoring in speaking, reading, and writing for adult English Language Learners.
- Consider treating your employees' time spent in these classes as paid work time! Investing in your employees' language skills will likely increase their engagement (and productivity) in the workplace.
- Offer advancement training as an incentive to employees who have reached a certain level of English proficiency (competency-based promotions)
- Assign a work buddy to the new employee (preferably, from the same culture/country/language group)

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