

VERA NETWORK RESOURCE

BEST PRACTICES FOR WORKING WITH INTERPRETERS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Guidance for Working with Interpreters	2
What is Interpreting?.....	2
Assessing the Child’s Language Proficiency.....	2
The Benefits of Having Bilingual Staff.....	2
Deciding on the Mode of Interpretation: Telephonic or In-Person?.....	3
Before the Session	3
During the Session.....	4
After the Session.....	5
Appendix A: Indigenous Languages Spoken in Central America.....	6

Introduction

A significant number of children in ORR custody do not speak English or Spanish. Communicating with these children can be challenging for attorneys and other service providers. To respond to this need, many organizations in Vera's Unaccompanied Children (UC) Legal Services Program network have developed partnerships with community members, professional interpreters, and others who provide pro bono interpretation for their core program services. This document aims to provide several best practices for working with interpreters.

Guidance for Working with Interpreters

What is Interpreting?

Interpreting is the process of orally transferring statements from one language into another. To interpret well one must not only be bilingual, but must also possess the requisite cognitive skills to memorize large amounts of information, convert the information very quickly from one language to another, and communicate effectively with multiple parties. Interpreters must ensure that the true meaning of what is said is not lost—they cannot omit, substitute, or add anything.

There are three main types of interpretation:

- **Consecutive:** The interpreter waits for the question or statement to be finished before interpreting what was said verbatim.
- **Simultaneous:** Also known as “U.N. style of interpreting,” during which the interpreter is rendering the interpretation verbatim while listening to the speaker.
- **Summary:** The interpreter listens to the question or statement, and then provides a summary of what was said. Because of the great import that even seemingly minor details can have, **summary interpretation should never be used** when providing legal or child advocate services within UC Legal Services Program.

Assessing the Child’s Language Proficiency

The first step in providing language services for a child is to assess his or her language skills so that you have a clear sense of the child’s language access needs. When assessing a child’s language proficiency it is important to ask the child what his or her “best” language is and to remind the child that they have the option to communicate via an interpreter. Even if the child says that he or she speaks Spanish, ask the child if he or she speaks any of the indigenous languages that are commonly spoken in the child’s country of origin (see Appendix A for a list of indigenous languages spoken in Central America). If the child speaks an indigenous language but has identified Spanish as acceptable for communication, check for comprehension by asking several questions in Spanish that require a full sentence response or by asking the child to repeat statements back to you in his or her own words. Do not rely on a facility staff person’s assessment of a child’s language proficiency.

If it is evident that the child does not speak English or Spanish well, you will need to identify which language the child speaks with as much accuracy as possible. Identifying the language spoken is perhaps the only time it is appropriate to use other children in a facility for interpretation assistance. For example, it would be acceptable to request the assistance of a child who has already been identified as speaking the same language as the child whose language ability you are assessing, and who also speaks English or Spanish, to determine your child-client’s language ability.

The Benefits of Having Bilingual Staff

For purposes of your work within the UC Legal Services Program, we recommend using bilingual staff within your program to communicate with the children whenever possible. In addition to bridging the

language gap, bilingual staff are also better able to build rapport with a child, which improves communication overall. However, we recognize the dearth of bilingual staff that are fluent in many languages commonly spoken by children served within the UC Legal Services Program, and that third-party interpreters are often the only way to communicate with a child.

Deciding on the Mode of Interpretation: Telephonic or In-Person?

An in-person interpreter should be used, if possible, in the following situations:

- *The content to be discussed is particularly complex or emotionally charged.*
- *The encounter is lengthy, formal or particularly significant.*
- *The encounter involves multiple parties.*

In-person interpretation is not always feasible or necessary. Telephonic interpreting is another option, and works best in the following situations:

- *Determining what language a client speaks.* Local staff may not have the resources necessary to determine which language an individual speaks. A quality telephone interpretation service will have interpreters who are skilled in helping to determine the language spoken by a non-English speaker.
- *Conversations that will be conducted over the phone anyway.* Clearly, if an interaction is going to be done over the phone, use of a telephonic interpreter is appropriate. In these cases an interpreter should be brought into a three-way conference call. Interpreters should never be asked to call the client independently to relay a message.
- *The content to be discussed is relatively straightforward.* Telephonic interpreting is effective in simple, factual interactions in which no emotionally charged content will be discussed and no negotiation will be required.
- *An in-person interpreter is not available.* When an in-person interpreter cannot be accessed or the wait for in-person interpretation is prohibitively long, a telephonic interpreter is sometimes the only option.

Before the Session

Ideally, you and the interpreter should have a pre-session discussion during which you talk about issues that may affect the interview and decide how to address them, and to establish rapport with the interpreter. During this discussion, you should:

- Explain the purpose of the interview
- Explain the role of the interpreter (this is especially important when working with an interpreter who is not professionally trained in interpretation)
- Agree upon the mode of interpreting (e.g., consecutive, simultaneous)
- If it is an in-person interpretation, instruct the interpreter to sit between you and the child in a “triangle” formation so that all communicating parties are in the interpreter’s line of sight.

If you expect to use any technical terms during the interview, explain them. Many languages do not have terminology for some legal jargon, so decide beforehand how to deal with this challenge.

This is also a good time to set ground rules for how you expect the interpreter to act during the interpretation. For example:

- Interpreters should not edit what the child says by adding, omitting or substituting words.
- Interpreters should not express first-person statements in the third person (as in “He says...” or “She said...”) as it is confusing, time consuming, and not a faithful interpretation of the speaker’s statement.
- Interpreters should not engage in independent conversation during the interview with either you or the client.
- Interpreters should ask the speakers to pause, slow down, or repeat what was said whenever necessary to ensure an accurate interpretation.

During the Session

During any encounter with a child when you are using an interpreter, it is important to build rapport with the child. Two important ways to do this are by maintaining eye contact with the child, not the interpreter, and by acknowledging the child with your body language. If the child speaks some English or Spanish, you should make clear to the child that you are using an interpreter to ensure accuracy, not because you do not trust the child’s language skills. As mentioned before, when you are using an in-person interpreter, it is best to sit in a “triangle” formation, with the interpreter in between you and the child. This will ensure that the interpreter can see both you and the child and that you can maintain eye contact with the child while you are speaking.

Don’t forget to introduce the interpreter to the child and explain his or her role. Be sure to mention the following:

- The interpreter will interpret everything that you and the child say.
- You will speak in short phrases to help the interpreter interpret more easily. The interpreter may occasionally ask the child to pause so that he or she can interpret more easily because everything the child says is important. This does not mean that the child’s answer has to stop when the interpreter stops him or her. The child should continue with his or her response once the interpreter has interpreted the preceding statement.
- Confidentiality: Neither you nor the interpreter will reveal anything about the session to uninvolved parties, and you will ask for the child’s consent to discuss his or her case prior to any disclosures necessary for his or her case.
- Also, be sure to ask the child if he or she has any questions about the interpreting process.

The following scripts may help you explain the interpretation process to the child:

- “The interpreter is here because I do not speak your language. The interpreter is here to interpret what you and I say as we discuss your legal case.”
- “I have asked the interpreter to sit in the middle of us so that the interpreter can do a good job. I will speak directly to you and look at you while I am speaking. You should try to speak directly to me as well.”

- “The interpreter will interpret everything I say. In the same way, the interpreter will interpret everything you say.”
- “I will speak in short phrases so that the interpreter can interpret what I say more easily.”
- “The interpreter may ask you to stop sometimes so that he or she can interpret what you have said. This is because it is very important to me that I understand everything that you say. If the interpreter asks you stop, but you have more to say, you should continue your answer when he or she is finished speaking.”

Once the interpretation begins, follow these guidelines:

- Avoid jargon, technical terms, or slang; use plain English whenever possible.
- Speak slower, not louder.
- Be patient and allow for the additional time it takes to complete the interview with an interpreter.
- Do not leave the interpreter and the child alone together.
- If you are using a telephonic interpreter, describe any documents or drawings out loud.

After the Session

At the end of the interpretation session or as soon as possible thereafter, it is recommended that you debrief with the interpreter to flag any problems that may have occurred and were not dealt with during the interpretation session. For example, you may wish to discuss the following:

- Were there any times when the interpreter felt that he/she could not accurately and faithfully interpret?
- The interpreter’s impressions of the child’s comprehension of what was said.
- Other problems or misunderstandings that may have arisen. This may include an interpreter’s perceptions of any cultural misunderstandings. ****NOTE:** The interpreter may have his or her own cultural beliefs that may conflict with those of the child.
- Suggestions for how you can be more sensitive or responsive to the child’s needs during an interview, taking into account any unique language or cultural considerations.

Appendix A

Indigenous Languages Spoken in Central America¹

Belize

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
Kekchí	Cacché ; Kekch ; Kekchi ; Kekchí ; Ketchí ; Quecchí
Maya, Mopán	Mopane ; Maya Mopán ; Maya, Mopán
Maya, Yucatán	Maya, Yucatán ; Yucateco

Costa Rica

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
* Boruca	Boruca ; Borunca ; Borunka ; Brunca ; Brunka ; Burnca ; Burunca
Bribri	Amubre-Katsi ; Bribri ; Coroma ; Salitre-Cabagra ; Talamanca ; Viceíta
Cabécar	Cabécar ; Chirripó ; Chirripó ; Estrella ; Telire ; Tucurrique ; Ujarrás
Maléku Jaíka	Guatuso ; Guetar ; Maléku Jaíka ; Watuso ; Watuso-Wétar
Ngäbere	Guaymí ; gymimí ; Mobe ; Move ; Ngäbere ; Ngawbere ; Norteño ; Penonomeño
Teribe	Terraba ; Teribe

El Salvador

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
Kekchí	Kekchi ; Quecchí ; Cacché
* Lenca	Lenca
* Pipil	Nahuate ; Nahuat ; Nawat ; Pipil
Poqomam	Pokomam, Central

Guatemala

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
Achi', Cubulco	Achi', Cubulco
Achi', Rabinal	Rabinal K'iche' ; Achi', Rabinal
Aguacateco	Aguacatec ; Awakateco
Ch'orti'	Apay ; Ch'orti ; Ch'orti' ; Chorti
Chuj, Ixtatán	Chuj, Ixtatán ; Chuje ; Chuh ; Chuj de San Mateo Ixtatán ; Chuhe
Chuj	Chuj, San Sebastián Coatán
* Itza'	Icaiche Maya ; Itz ; Itzá ; Itza' ; Maya ; Petén Itzá Maya ; Yucatec Maya
Ixil, Chajul	Ixil, Chajul ; Ilom
Ixil, Nebaj	Ixil, Nebaj
Ixil	Ixil, San Juan Cotzal
Jacalteco, Western	Popti' ; Jakalteco, Western ; Western Jacalteco
K'iche', Cunén	Chuil Quiché ; K'iche', Cunén ; Northern Quiché ; Cunén Quiché ; Cunenteco Quiché ; Cunenteco K'iche'

¹ Language names are hyperlinked to websites containing additional information. Also see LinguistList, *Languages of Central America*. Retrieved August 11, 2008 from <http://linguistlist.org/forms/langs/central-america.cfm>

* Denotes a language that is near extinction.

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
K'iche', Eastern	East Central Quiché ; Eastern Quiché ; K'iche', Eastern ; Chichicastenango Eastern Quiché
K'iche', Joyabaj	K'iche', Joyabaj ; Joyabaj Quiché
K'iche', San Andrés	San Andrés Sajcabajá Quiché ; K'iche', San Andrés
K'iche', West Central	K'iche', West Central ; Coastal K'iche' ; Western K'iche' ; Southwestern Quiché ; Cantel Quiché
Kanjobal, Western	Western Q'anjob'al ; Akateko ; Acatec ; San Miguel Acatán Kanjobal ; Acateco ; Western Kanjobal ; Conob
Kaqchikel, Akatenango Southwestern	Kaqchikel, Akatenango Southwestern ; Acatenango Southwestern Cakchiquel
Kaqchikel, Eastern	Kaqchikel, Eastern ; Eastern Cakchiquel
Kaqchikel, Northern	Northern Cakchiquel ; Kaqchikel, Northern
Kaqchikel, Santa María de Jesús	Santa María de Jesús Cakchiquel ; Kaqchikel, Santa María de Jesús ; Kach'ab'al
Kaqchikel, Santo Domingo Xenacoj	Santo Domingo Xenacoj Cakchiquel ; Xenacoj ; Kaqchikel, Santo Domingo Xenacoj
Kaqchikel, South Central	Kaqchikel, South Central ; South Central Cakchiquel
Kaqchikel, Southern	Southern Cakchiquel ; Kaqchikel, Southern
Kaqchikel, Western	Western Cakchiquel ; Kaqchikel, Western
Kaqchikel, Yepocapa Southwestern	Kaqchikel, Yepocapa Southwestern ; Yepocapa Southwestern Cakchiquel
Kekchí	Q'eqchi' ; Cacche' ; Ketchi' ; Kekchi' ; Quecchi'
Mam, Central	Comitancillo Mam ; Mam, Central ; Western Mam ; San Marcos Comitancillas Mam ; Mam Marquense ; Mam Occidental
Mam,	Huehuetenango Mam ; Mam, Northern
Mam, Southern	Mam Quetzalteco ; San Martín Chile Verde Mam ; San Martín Sacatepéquez Mam ; Quetzaltenango Mam ; Ostuncalco Mam ; San Juan Ostuncalco Mam ; Mam, Southern
Mam, Tajumulco	Mam, Tajumulco
Mam, Todos Santos	Mam de Todos Santos Cuchumatán ; Mam, Todos Santos Cuchumatán
Maya, Mopán	Maya Mopán ; Maya, Mopán ; Mopane
Poqomam	Poqomam, Central ; Pokomam ; Central Pocomam ; Pocomán
Poqomam, Eastern	Poqomam, Eastern ; Pocomam Oriental ; Eastern Pokomam
Poqomam, Southern	Poqomam, Southern ; Palín Pocomam ; Southern Pokomam
Poqomchi',	Poqomchi', Eastern ; Pocomchí ; Poconchí ; Pokonchí ; Tactic Pokomchí ; Eastern Pokomchí
Poqomchi', Western	Western Pokomchí ; Santa Cruz Verapaz Poqomchi' ; Western Pocomchí ; Pocomchí ; Poqomchi', Western ; Poqomchi'
Q'anjob'al	Conob ; Eastern Kanjobal ; Kanjobal ; Q'anjob'al, Eastern ; Qanjobal ; Santa Eulalia Kanjobal
Quiché	Cachabel ; Central Quiché ; Chiquel ; K'iche', Central ; Quiche ; Quiché

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
Sacapulteco	Sacapulteco ; Sakapulteco ; Sacapulas K'iche'
Sipacapense	Sipakapense ; Sipacapense ; Sipacapa Quiché ; Sipacapeño
Tacanec	Tacanec ; Tacaná Mam ; Tiló ; Mamé ; Western Mam
Tektiteko	Tektiteko ; Tectitán Mam ; Teco ; Maya-Tekiteko ; Tectiteco ; Teko
Tz'utujil,	Tz'utujil, Eastern ; Tzutujil Oriental ; Santiago Atitlán Tzutujil ; Tzutuhil
Tz'utujil, Western	Tz'utujil, Western
Uspanteco	Uspanteco ; Uspanteko

Honduras

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
Ch'orti'	Ch'orti'
Chinese, Yue	Chinese, Yue
* Lenca	Lenca ; Lenca Proper
Mískito	Marquito ; Mísquito ; Mískitu ; Mískito ; Mosquito
Pech	Bayano ; Paya ; Pech ; Seco ; Taia ; Towka
Sumo Tawahka	Sumo ; Soumo ; Sumu ; Sumoo ; Sumo Tawahka
Tol	Cicaque ; Hicaque ; Ikake ; Jicaque ; Taguaca ; Tauhca ; Tol ; Tolpan ; Torrupan ; Xicaque

Nicaragua

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
Garifuna	Garifuna ; Moreno ; Garífuna ; Caribe ; Central American Carib ; Black Carib
Mískito	Tauira ; Tawira ; Baldam ; Mosquito ; Mískitu ; Cabo ; Kabo ; Wangki ; Mam ; Mískito ; Baymuna ; Marquito ; Honduran Mískito ; Wanki ; Baymunana ; Mísquito
* Rama	Boto ; Melchora ; Rama ; Voto
Sumo Tawahka	Sumoo ; Ulwa ; Woolwa ; Panamahka ; Soumo ; Sumu ; Taguaca ; Nicaraguan Tawahka ; Sumo ; Sumo Tawahka ; Bawihka ; Sumo-Mayangna ; Kukra

Panama

Language Name	Dialect & Alternate Names
Buglere	Bobota ; Veraguas Sabanero ; Murire ; Nortenyo ; Bokota ; Bofota ; Bukueta ; Bogota ; Bocota ; Buglere ; Bokotá ; Sabanero
Emberá, Northern	Dariena ; Eerã ; Empera ; Darien ; Atrato ; Emberá, Northern ; Cholo ; Ebera Bedea ; Panama Embera
Emberá-Catío	Emberá-Catío ; Epera ; Katio ; Embena ; Catío
Epena	Emberá-Saija ; Epena Saija ; Saija ; Southern Empera ; Southern Embera ; Cholo ; Epena ; Basurudo ; Epéna Pedée
Kuna, Border	Long Hair Cuna ; Colombia Cuna ; Kuna, Border ; Paya-Pucuro Kuna ; Kuna de la Frontera ; Cuna ; Caiman Nuevo
Kuna, San Blas	Kuna, San Blas ; Maje ; Bayano ; Alto Bayano ; San Blas Cuna ; Cueva ; Chuana
Ngäbere	Guaymí ; Ngobere ; Chiriquí ; Valiente ; Valiente ; Chiriquí ; Ngäbere ; Eastern Guaymí ; Tolé
Teribe	Tirribi ; Terraba ; Quequexque ; Nortenyo ; Tiribi ; Naso ; Teribe
Woun Meu	Chanco ; Nonama ; Chocama ; Woun Meu ; Noenama ; Waun Meo ; Wounmeu ; Wounaan ; Noanama ; Waunana ; Waumeo

