



# Working with interpreters by phone in a family violence setting

This resource is for community service professionals. It forms part of a series on best practice, particularly when working with victim-survivors of family violence who are from refugee and migrant communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent restrictions around social distancing, has required a major shift from in-person to phone-based service delivery across a range of sectors. For many service providers working with women and families from migrant or refugee backgrounds, this is a new and potentially unfamiliar setting. Building trust and understanding by phone, and using interpreters takes skill and practice.

At inTouch over 40% of the women we work with require interpreters at intake. This resource shares some of our key insights on getting the most out of using interpreting services and ensuring effective engagement with clients is maintained.

## Prior to the phone consultation

- ✓ Confirm language and dialect with the client prior to booking an interpreter. Remember that the country of birth is not a reliable indicator of the language spoken.
- ✓ When working with clients experiencing family violence, we have a duty of care to keep individuals safe, and in Victoria we need to comply with the MARAM framework. Be sure to consult the MARAM practice guides and resources on the Victorian State Government Department of Health and Human Services website.
- ✓ Inform your client of what to expect during the phone call. inTouch has produced in-language resources on this topic which may be useful for your client, and can be found on our website.
- ✓ Check whether the client would like to remain anonymous when speaking with the interpreter by using a different name.
- ✓ Think about context and environment. It can be tempting to work to the availability of the interpreter but it is critical that the client has a safe and quiet space to talk freely, with a good phone connection.
- ✓ Allow more time. Working with an interpreter can take longer, especially by phone.
- ✓ Be sensitive about gender. Victim-survivors often feel more comfortable with female interpreters when discussing family violence. If possible ask the client if they would prefer a female interpreter.
- ✓ Brief the interpreter. Make sure they understand and are comfortable with the nature of the work.

## Pro-Tip: How to brief your interpreter

Even though an interpreter speaks the language it does not necessarily mean they are trained to know how to discuss sensitive matters appropriately. Remember that there may not be a perfect 'textbook' translation for technical terms such as *risk assessment* or *intervention order*. It is best to use simple, clear language, rather than putting the interpreter in a position where they have to guess how to explain something.

For example, instead of *economic abuse*, you could say, "Do they stop you from having your own money?" Instead of *surveillance*, you could say, "Do they check your phone all the time and tell you who you can spend time with?"

## At the beginning of the phone consultation

- ✓ Introduce yourself, the interpreter and the client (unless the client wishes to remain anonymous in which case use a pre-agreed name).
- ✓ Discuss the role of the interpreter clearly. Don't assume a client knows what interpreters do. Explain that interpreters are not there to provide thoughts, opinions or explanations, but instead interpret what is being said and nothing more.
- ✓ Explain that interpreters are bound by confidentiality and a Code of Ethics.
- ✓ On occasion within some smaller communities, the interpreter and client may be known to one another and the client may feel uncomfortable disclosing private matters. If you believe this may be influencing the discussion, ask the client directly if they know the interpreter and confirm if they are still happy to proceed. If not, a new appointment should be made with a different interpreter or potentially an interpreter from a different state or territory.
- ✓ Describe the process for the phone consultation. Tell the client that sentences will be brief and followed by a pause for interpreting. Make sure they know that everything said will be interpreted in full.
- ✓ Tell the client you will check in during the call to ensure that they are happy with the interpreting. If they are not happy, the call should not continue and another appointment made with a different interpreter.

### Pro-Tip: Building trust with your client

Not all clients from migrant and refugee communities are happy to talk to service providers. For example, the referral may have come from Child Protection. Some clients may have a significant fear of authority figures or organisations from their prior experiences. Others may doubt the confidentiality of interpreting services. Take the time to explain that the interpreter Code of Ethics prevents them from talking about you to anyone else. Explain that if the interpreter does not adhere to the Code that they can make a formal complaint.

## During the phone consultation

- ✓ Be patient.
- ✓ Speak clearly. Avoid using acronyms or jargon. For example, instead of using the term physical violence, discuss specific acts such as hitting, punching, choking.
- ✓ Listen out for signs of interpreter discomfort. If an interpreter seems to be doing minimal interpretation they may feel uncomfortable with the subject matter. Use direct language that doesn't leave room for euphemism or guesswork. If you are still concerned that the interpreter's discomfort or conduct may be influencing the discussion, you can check with them, discontinue the call and schedule another appointment.
- ✓ Remember there is a difference between understanding the words and understanding the culture. It is not the interpreter's job to explain concepts such as what constitutes abuse.
- ✓ Summarise the conversation regularly and paraphrase throughout to ensure that there is shared understanding between yourself and the client.

### Pro-Tip: Engage with your client

Talk directly to the client. Ensure that the client is doing the same, addressing you directly not the interpreter. Using the client's name often may help.

Have a conversation. Despite using short sentences and pausing for interpretation, use an engaging, conversational style rather than a question / answer approach.

### For further reading, try the excellent resources found at the following sites:

- > Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health:
  - Interpreters: an introduction.
  - Communicating via an interpreter information sheet.
- > Victoria State Government Department of Health and Human Services – Language services policy and guidelines.