

## Section 2:

# Working with Interpreters

# Introduction

Effective communication between service providers and their clients is essential to delivering high quality services. Victoria's remarkably diverse population makes it vital for service providers to make effective use of interpreting services.

Interpreting services requires time, money and organisation. This guide will assist agencies to work more effectively with interpreters. It also provides practical information on how to arrange interpreting services.

This guide covers:

- interpreting services available in Victoria

- assessing the need for interpreting services
- arranging interpreting services
- why professional interpreters are your best option
- working with interpreters
- accountability and professional standards of Australian interpreters.

Appendix F lists over 200 countries and their main languages.

Information on translating services is available in Section 3 - Organising Translations.

# Available Interpreting Services

There are three types of interpreting services available in Victoria:

- on-site interpreting
- telephone interpreting
- videoconference interpreting.

## On-site interpreting

An on-site interpreter attends a meeting in person and should generally be used in situations where complex or lengthy matters need to be discussed.

On-site interpreters offer a personal service by facilitating both non-verbal and verbal communication. This may result in a broader understanding of the information than occurs with telephone interpreting, where the interpreter cannot see either the client or staff member.

On-site interpreting is generally more expensive than other interpreting options and requires advance notice, particularly where interpreters are required to travel long distances. The availability of on-site interpreters may also be limited in some rural and regional areas as interpreters may need to be sourced from Melbourne.

Most interpreting agencies have a minimum fee for on-site interpreting, based on 90 minute or two hour sessions. If a session with an interpreter only takes 30 minutes, you will still be charged for 90 minutes or two hours of interpreting. Increased value for money can be obtained by scheduling consecutive interviews with clients with the same preferred language.

## Telephone interpreting

A telephone interpreter delivers a service over the telephone.

Telephone interpreting is particularly useful in emergency situations when you need immediate assistance. It is less expensive and more anonymous than on-site interpreting. It is also more widely used in remote or regional areas.

Telephone interpreters can also be used to establish the language spoken and the nature of an enquiry before an on-site interpreter is called for.

Telephone interpreting may not be suitable for interviews of a complex nature.

## Section 2 Part 2

Telephone interpreters cannot take account of non-verbal signals and some clients, such as the elderly, may not be comfortable using the telephone. In some instances, a face-to-face meeting with an interpreter may be better.

Telephone interpreting is not suitable for Auslan users or other people with hearing impairment or where forms need to be filled in. For more information on Auslan see Appendix C.

Telephone interpreting can be pre-booked and is generally charged per 15 minutes.

### **Videoconference interpreting**

Videoconference interpreting uses an interpreter to deliver a service through video.

This type of interpreting service enables large groups of people to take part in a discussion and can be organised at short notice.

Videoconference interpreting may appeal to organisations in rural and regional locations that find it difficult to access, or meet the travel costs associated with, on-site interpreting services. Using videoconferencing may save organisations time and money. It

is an ideal alternative to on-site interpreting.

Videoconferencing technology is available through many government offices, hospitals, TAFE institutions, local councils and courts.

One disadvantage is that some people may lack the knowledge or confidence to use the required technology. Not all agencies can offer videoconferencing.

Charges for videoconference interpreting are similar to those for on-site interpreting but there may be additional telecommunications costs.

### **Where do I find accredited interpreters?**

**Quick Reference**

Professional translating and interpreting agencies are listed in the Yellow Pages.

Accredited interpreters, including Auslan interpreters, can be found using the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters Ltd. (NAATI) Directory of Accredited and Recognised Practitioners of Interpreting and Translating, available at [www.naati.com.au](http://www.naati.com.au), or from the Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators Inc. (AUSIT) website ([www.ausit.org](http://www.ausit.org)).

## Section 2 Part 2

As interpreting agencies may not always use accredited interpreters, you should ask agencies for the NAATI credentials of their interpreters and ensure any service agreements made reflect the level and quality of services required.

Departments and agencies often have arrangements in place for obtaining interpreting services, including authorisation procedures, funding responsibilities and preferred agencies. Some areas within departments may also have binding contracts with preferred providers.

Before contacting an interpreting agency, make sure you are aware of any such arrangements by contacting the relevant multicultural, diversity or communications area within your department.

### **How do I know if an interpreter is accredited?**

People who work as interpreters may not always have accreditation. To verify that an interpreter is NAATI-accredited or recognised, you can ask to see the interpreter's NAATI identification card or accreditation certificate.

Victorian Government policy is that interpreters used by government departments and funded agencies be NAATI-accredited to a professional level or above. Paraprofessional interpreters should only be used where NAATI accreditation is not available at the professional level or where no professional interpreter can be sourced. Where NAATI does not accredit practitioners in a particular language, a recognised interpreter may be used.

Interpreters are also expected to observe the national Code of Ethics and Code of Practice for Interpreters and Translators developed by AUSIT. This is summarised in Appendix D.

### **Funding arrangements**

Interpreting services are provided on a fee-for-service basis.

Some organisations receive funding from Government specifically to provide interpreting services; others are required to meet these costs within their overall budget. Some departments directly pay interpreting agencies to provide services to clients of funded agencies. The Commonwealth Translating and Interpreting Service provides some fee-free services, which are outlined in Appendix B.

## Section 2 Part 2

Organisations should refer to policies and guidelines relevant to their agency for information about funding and access arrangements before booking an interpreter.

Fees for interpreting services generally vary according to the:

- accreditation level of the interpreter, and
- length of the assignment.

The Victorian Settlement Planning Committee has produced a model to

assist agencies in assessing their translating and interpreting needs. This is available at <http://www.immi.gov.au/tis/model.pdf>.

See Section 1 - Policy and procedures for more information.

# How to assess your clients' interpreting needs

Effective communication between service providers and clients ensures that individual needs can be recognised and addressed.

Your clients should be confident that their specific needs are understood. Likewise, service providers need to feel confident that their clients understand the information they convey. In this way, there is a direct link between good communication and high quality service. A qualified interpreter assists both parties to communicate.

In some cases, it will be obvious that you need an interpreter to communicate with your client. In other cases, the need may be more difficult to assess.

The ability to use conversational English does not always mean that complex conversations or technical terms such as those used by doctors, nurses or lawyers are understood. A person may have sufficient English to

respond to basic questions but may not be able to manage a formal interview or complex discussion without an interpreter.

One way to gauge whether an interpreter is needed is to ask your client to summarise what you have said. If there is an obvious lack of understanding, you may need to consider engaging an interpreter, even where a client considers this unnecessary.

A client's ability to communicate in English is one factor to consider when deciding whether an interpreter is needed. Other factors include:

- whether important decisions need to be made
- whether important information needs to be conveyed
- deafness or other communication difficulties
- your client's ability to effectively communicate in a stressful or unfamiliar environment
- whether your client prefers to communicate in their own language, even though they can communicate in English
- departmental or agency policies on when interpreters must be used.

# How to arrange interpreters

## Checklists to follow before you contact your service provider

### For on-site interpreting:

*You need to say:*

- the client's name
- the language you need
- the date and time you need an interpreter
- the type of interview, e.g. medical consultation, court hearing
- the contact staff member and telephone number of the person the interpreter should report to on arrival
- the address of the agency and the location of the interview, including floor and room number
- the nature of the matter to be discussed, e.g. specialist legal, medical, educational
- approximately how long the interview will take
- the interpreter's name, if you or the client wish for a specific interpreter, for continuity of care reasons.

Quick Reference

*You need to ask:*

- the interpreter's name (although this may not be available at the time of booking)
- whether a female or male interpreter is available, if your client has expressed a preference or this is likely to be important due to the subject matter being interpreted or cultural issues
- for an interpreter from the same religious background as your client, if this is pertinent to the client's issue or concern
- whether it is possible to meet with the interpreter for a briefing interview, if required.

If you are unable to meet the interpreter before the interview or hearing, we recommend that you offer the interpreter a telephone number and ask them to contact you before the interview date if they have any questions. De-briefing after the interview also helps you to evaluate the quality of the communication. Charges may apply.



### For telephone interpreting:

You need to say:

- the client's name
- the language you need
- the direct telephone number, if possible, and name of contact staff member
- whether a speaker telephone will be available
- the date and time you need the service, if the service is not needed immediately
- the nature of the matter to be discussed, e.g. specialist legal, medical, educational

You need to ask:

- the interpreter's name (although this may not be available at the time of booking)
- whether it is possible to brief the interpreter beforehand, if the session has been booked for a later date.

De-briefing after the interview also helps you to evaluate the quality of the communication.

Whether you are arranging on-site, telephone or videoconference interpreting you should stipulate that you expect an accredited professional interpreter for those languages tested by NAATI.

### Identifying languages

Guessing a client's language by their country of birth can be unreliable. For example, a person from China may speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka or any of a number of other Chinese dialects. If a client is unaccompanied by an English-speaking person, you may need to use a telephone interpreter or visual aids to identify their spoken language.

In situations where a client speaks a particularly rare dialect, it may be useful to ask whether they also speak another language, and how well. For example, someone born in Malaysia may have Hakka as their first language and Malay as their second. If there are no interpreters who speak the client's preferred language, you may be able to arrange an interpreter who speaks their second language.

Appendix F lists over 200 countries and their main languages.

# Why professional interpreters should be used

## Using qualified interpreters

Use of accredited professional interpreters maximises accuracy and professionalism and shows your commitment to providing quality services for your clients.

A professionally accredited interpreter:

- will ensure that messages are received and conveyed accurately
- will provide confidential and impartial interpretation
- is bound by the AUSIT Code of Ethics
- can significantly reduce the time it takes to work through an issue with a client.

NAATI accredits interpreters at four levels: paraprofessional interpreter; professional interpreters; conference interpreters and conference interpreter (senior). NAATI also awards qualifications to language aide and recognised interpreters, which are not formal accreditations, but recognise particular language skills.

For further information on NAATI accreditation see Section 1- Policy and procedures.

You or your agency should make it clear to clients that professional interpreters are engaged to serve the interests of both clients and agencies.

A client may feel more comfortable working with an interpreter if a family member or friend is present. In these cases it should be understood that the professional interpreter is responsible for interpreting between you and the client.

## Can clients use family or friends to interpret?

Clients may ask to use a family member or friend to interpret for them. Unaccredited friends or family members may not be competent, may be emotionally involved, may lack impartiality and are not bound by the same standards of conduct as qualified interpreters. However, if the client understands the consequences of this choice and this action does not put Government at risk, a family member or friend may be used.

To better understand the risk in using unaccredited friends, family members or staff as interpreters see Section 1- Policy and procedures.

# Working with interpreters

## Understanding the interpreter's role

Interpreting is a highly skilled job, requiring concentration, linguistic ability and contextual knowledge.

It is not simply a mechanical task of matching the non-English word or expression with its English equivalent (if indeed such an equivalent exists). Different sentence constructions for different languages and meanings of words or phrases cannot always be conveyed literally. For example, a literal interpretation of a term like Meals on Wheels would have no meaning in another language to someone unfamiliar with the concept. Instead the interpreter would have to explain that Meals on Wheels is a program that delivers pre-cooked meals to the homes of those who have difficulty cooking for themselves.

To assist in their task interpreters may occasionally need to take notes, consult a dictionary or ask for terms or concepts to be clarified. They may ask you to give information in shorter segments so they can comprehend and convey that

information more accurately. It can be helpful to talk to the interpreter in advance of the meeting about what you will be discussing.

Some interpreters have particular training and expertise in the legal and health systems. You may wish to check the availability of interpreters with skills relevant to the interpreting task when making a booking.

## Tips for working effectively with interpreters

All agencies should provide appropriate training to staff likely to work with interpreters, to ensure staff make the most effective use of an interpreter's services. Most language services providers deliver this form of training.

In addition to training, the following tips and recommendations can help staff to work more effectively with interpreters:

### ***Before the interview***

- Ensure you know which language your client speaks and arrange an appropriately qualified interpreter.
- If possible, establish whether your client knows the assigned interpreter. If this is the case, you may need to book another interpreter to maintain confidentiality.

**Quick Reference**

- Immediately before the interview you may want to arrange a short briefing session with the interpreter to provide general background information, such as specific terms used in the agency and what you want to achieve from the interview.

### ***At the beginning of the interview***

- For on-site interpreting, position yourself in a way that allows you to speak directly to the client with maximum eye contact.
- Begin by introducing yourself to the interpreter and then introduce yourself and the interpreter to the client.
- Explain your role and the interpreter's role. Stress that the interpreter's role is not to add to the communication but only to interpret what has been said. Communication problems can occur when clients expect the interpreter to act as an advocate.
- Explain what the interview is about and what you hope to achieve. You should not assume that your client knows what the interview is about. Allow the client to raise any questions or issues of concern.

### ***During the interview***

- Talk directly to your client and maintain eye contact.
- Use the first person when speaking to your client (for example, say 'Do you' instead of 'Ask him/her'). This encourages both of you to communicate directly with each other and to use eye contact and positive body language.
- Use clear language (plain English), avoiding slang, colloquialisms and proverbs.
- Make one point at a time. Keep your questions, statements and comments short and deliver them in segments. This gives the interpreter time to understand what you've said and to pass information to the client in stages. The interpreter will signal if your comments or questions are too long.
- Allow the interpreter to clarify information with you, if the meaning is unclear. Similarly, allow your client to raise questions or issues of concern. If there is a need to clarify or discuss something with the interpreter, ask that this be explained to the client first. This way you involve the client at all times.

- For reasons of accuracy and impartiality, never ask the interpreter to express an opinion on the client or what they have said. Do not ask the interpreter to edit your information to suit the client's background, or to tell you about the client's cultural background. Ask the client directly for such information.

Summarise the discussion occasionally to ensure your client understands the information.

### ***At the end of the interview***

- Summarise key points for your client. Make sure they understand the information you've given and any follow-up action, such as completing and returning forms.

### ***After the interview***

- You may want to debrief the interpreter and obtain feedback on any interpreting or personal difficulties experienced during the interview. It may also be helpful to give the interpreter the opportunity to explain any issues that may have come up in the interview.

# What professional standards can you expect from interpreters?

## Accountability

You, as well as your staff and clients, need to be confident that interpreting services are of the highest quality. Maintaining and promoting the professionalism of interpreting services is therefore extremely important.

You should expect accredited interpreters to be responsible and accountable and to comply with the Code of Ethics developed by AUSIT. The general principles outlined in this Code include confidentiality, impartiality and accuracy. For more information see Appendix D.

## What to do if your interpreting service is unsatisfactory

If an interpreter fails to comply with the principles outlined in the AUSIT Code of Ethics, you have the right to take action, and should do so in the interests of maintaining professional standards of interpreting in Australia.

### Issues with individuals

Raise any unprofessional or unsatisfactory practices directly with the interpreter at the end of the interview, to see if a resolution can be reached. Complaints may relate to the interpreter being late, not interpreting everything that is said, carrying on a side conversation, answering the phone during the interview or speaking on behalf of the client. Also discuss with the interpreter why you thought it was unacceptable.

You may also want to raise these matters directly with the interpreting agency, especially if the problem persists or more serious issues arise. Most agencies have a complaints mechanism to resolve issues.

### ***Issues with interpreting agencies***

If you have a complaint regarding the services provided by an interpreting agency, such as losing bookings, charging incorrect fees or providing interpreters with inappropriate levels of accreditation, it is advisable to discuss the matter with the person responsible for dealing with complaints, to see if a solution can be arranged.

If problems persist you may wish to consider lodging a formal, written complaint. Written complaints should be addressed to the head of the agency.

If your organisation has a service contract or funding agreement with a

particular interpreting services agency, you should make sure that the contract or agreement includes provisions for making complaints and reporting on complaints made. Such provisions would include nominated persons to receive complaints, timelines for resolving complaints, processes for dealing with complaints and regular reporting on the nature of complaints made by type and outcome.

The adequacy of complaints-handling mechanisms should be one of the factors taken into account when renewing or renegotiating service contracts or funding agreements.