

Working with Interpreters

10 Important Tips for Communicating with Clients with Limited English Proficiency (LEP)

- 1. Offer an interpreter** even if your client speaks some English. Limited English clients (LEPs) may not know interpreters are available or may feel embarrassed to ask for one. They should not have to struggle with limited understanding.
- 2. Schedule additional time.** Communicating through an interpreter takes at least *twice* as long as the same conversation with a client who is fluent in English.
- 3. Introduce yourself and the interpreter** to the LEP client.
 - Check that the client and interpreter understand each other fully.
 - Explain that the interpreter's job is to interpret everything that is said by you and by the client, and not to offer her own opinion or advice.
- 4. Explain confidentiality rules** so the LEP client knows that the interpreter – like you – cannot share the client's information with anyone outside your agency.
- 5. Make sure the conversation is between you and the client,** not between the interpreter and the client.
 - Maintain eye contact with the LEP client.
 - Speak directly to her ("Do you have the document?"), instead of indirectly ("Ask her if she has the document.").
- 6. Speak clearly and pause for interpretation** after every sentence or two. Allow the interpreter to finish interpreting before speaking.
- 7. Check for understanding.** When explaining important concepts (required verification, program rules, etc.), ask the LEP client to repeat what you said in her own words. Do not just ask, "Do you understand?" A nod or "yes" may indicate deference to authority or a desire to continue the meeting, rather than actual understanding.
- 8. Speak in plain English** to avoid misinterpretation.
 - Explain any terms that are location- or agency-specific for more accurate interpretation (acronyms, program names, etc.). Remember that phone interpreters may be located in other states.
 - Minimize slang, idioms and metaphors.
 - Avoid compound questions.
- 9. Maintain control of the conversation.**
 - Make sure the interpreter does not answer for the LEP client.
 - Do not allow side conversations between the client and interpreter. Ask for full interpretation of everything that is said so that you don't miss important information.
 - Ask about interpretation that is longer or shorter than expected.
 - Record the name or ID number of telephone interpreters so you can report any problems with the interpretation. If needed, hang up and call back for a different interpreter.
- 10. Have the interpreter sight-translate important documents** that are in English, especially if the LEP client is asked to sign them. When possible, provide the documents to the interpreter before the meeting so that she can review them and ask about any specialized vocabulary.
 - Do *not* ask the interpreter to fill out forms or answer questions for the LEP client. Make sure that all questions are directed to you.
 - **If you are using a phone interpreter, explain the content of the documents** to the LEP client. Do not hang up with the interpreter until you have checked if the client has questions about the documents.