



There is a growing awareness of the importance of language interpretation for our increasingly diverse communities. Census data shows that nearly 2% of the population of Canada is not yet able to conduct a conversation in English or French - let alone discuss more complex health or legal issues.

Language interpretation has many benefits. Not only does interpretation result in better health and service outcomes and reduces miscommunication or errors, research has found that investments in the provision of interpretation are cost-effective. Ultimately, interpretation is critical for organizations to provide services effectively and equitably to all clients/patients.

This best practices checklist comes out of an awareness that it may be difficult for an organization to know where to start with incorporating interpretation into how they provide service. Typically, organizations may go through the following steps:

- Many organizations find that it is useful to begin by bringing information to senior decision-makers about the importance and impact of interpretation, the rationale or imperative for providing service to a diverse community, and a plan or options - in order to get organizational commitment and champions.
- The next step is often to draft an organizational commitment statement and policy - preferably building on examples from other organizations.
- Reviewing professional interpretation options and establishing a contract with an interpretation provider is typically a core part of offering quality interpretation. This may start small and build based on experience. Uptake may take time as staff and clients come to know about and trust the service.
- Training for staff and then communication about the availability of interpretation to clients and the public are critical next steps.
- Finally, gathering feedback from clients and staff and evaluating the service is critical to continually improve how services are delivered.

The following checklist provides detailed help with each of these steps and highlights recommended interpretation best practices based on research and on-the-ground experience. It is not a comprehensive list of requirements as much as a starting point for internal discussions about how we can provide better service to diverse clients/patients. Your organization may not have all the boxes checked at first but this checklist gives you a self-assessment tool that can be a roadmap to continual service improvement.

# COMMITMENT & LEADERSHIP

**Clear public commitment to high quality interpretation is critical to organizational buy-in and consistent interpretation usage. Leadership sets the tone and norms for the organization and broader community.**

- Our organization has made a formal interpretation commitment.** That public commitment may include a statement such as this one from the Ontario Health Team in the Kitchener-Waterloo area in Ontario:

"We are committed to ensuring that all patients have access to the health care services that they require. This means that patients can expect equitable access to health care services and that their experience is free from discrimination. We acknowledge that a patient can only give informed consent when they understand what they are consenting to. As health care institutions and service providers we will uphold our professional, ethical and moral obligations to ensure that patients can provide informed consent; this means that they understand the risks and benefits of treatments and can engage with us in a language in which they are able to adequately communicate.

We affirm that providing interpretation is the responsibility of the service provider and not the patient. We will endeavour to use trained interpreters in all medical, legal and other situations that require informed consent, confidentiality, specialized terminology or impartiality."

- Organizational leadership supports and promotes the importance and use of interpretation**
  - Champions are identified across the organization that can actively promote the use of interpretation**
  - Language services staff report directly to senior management** to establish regular accountability, ensure guidelines are being followed, and give clarity about the importance of interpretation
- We are engaged in broader community or sector efforts (for example within a local Ontario Health Team or other bodies) and advocate for changes regarding interpretation at a system level**

# POLICY

**An interpretation policy is critical to ensuring that the entire organization is “on the same page” and aspirations and expectations are clear to the community at large. A policy affirms the importance of using trained interpreters to improve communication and patient outcomes and to reduce errors, risks and liability. (Note that the term interpretation typically refers to verbal interactions and translation refers to written).**

**We have developed and follow a clear and comprehensive interpretation policy.** The policy includes statements about:

- Interpretation as a health equity issue and a medically necessary service**
- Trained interpreters need to be available for patients that need or request interpretation in all medical, legal and other situations that require informed consent, confidentiality, specialized terminology or impartiality.**
- Interpretation services are provided free of charge to the patient.**
- Interpretation services are available at all hours of operation.**
- Interpretation services are provided at all key points of contact.**
- Providing appropriate interpretation is the responsibility of the service provider and not the patient.** It is the responsibility of the service provider to ensure that the client understands what is being communicated or agreed to, and that the service provider fully understands what the client is communicating.
  
- Providers are required to obtain interpretation in cases where there is evidence of language barriers.**
- It is important to ask clients if they would like interpretation.** In some situations, a client may bring someone with them to provide informal interpretation. It is the service providers' responsibility to offer a trained interpreter for situations where this is most appropriate, according to the interpretation policy. It remains the client's choice, however, to decline this service if they wish.

- Minors (children under age 16) are not to be used for interpretation except in urgent situations after all possibilities of obtaining the services of a trained interpreter or of an informal interpreter over the age of 16 years have been exhausted.**
  
- Other untrained, informal interpreters (including family/friends of the patient, volunteers, bilingual staff of our own organization or another community agency) are not to be used for interpretation except in urgent situations after all possibilities of obtaining the services of a trained interpreter have been exhausted, or at the request of the patient.** For example, bilingual or multilingual individuals who do not have interpretation training (such as staff, registered volunteers, family members, friends) should not provide informal interpretation in patient education, diagnosis or informed consent or situations that require confidentiality, specialized terminology or impartiality. Policies may outline that untrained individuals can support communication in less critical activities such as: friendly support (patient comfort, requests, emotional support); customer services (way-finding, general information/orientation); determination of need for/request for a trained Interpreter; activities of daily living; routine menu selection (where there are no dietary restrictions or food allergies); completion of forms not related to history, diagnosis, consent; instructions for procedures for which education/consent has already been given (e.g. x-ray, blood work, lab work); registration; or appointment scheduling).
  
- Multilingual staff from settlement agencies, cultural organizations or other community agencies are typically not trained interpreters and should not be used when trained interpretation is needed.**
  
- When it is acceptable and not acceptable to use machine translation (e.g. Google Translate).**

# PROCESSES

Clear policies ensure that interpretation is consistently available and the organization can continually improve

- We have standards and processes regarding interpretation access for the organization that detail the following:**
  - Guidance for determining the need and when to provide interpretation.**
  - Guidance for determining when it is appropriate to use various modes of trained interpretation** (in-person, over-the-phone, and video).
  - Guidance for determining the occasions when untrained/informal interpreters may be used** (staff that are not trained interpreters, family or friends of patients, and machine translation such as Google Translate). It should be clear when these informal methods must not be used.
  - Guidance for accessing approved interpretation services.**
  
- We have internal processes that make using interpretation easy and effective for service providers and patients, including:**
  - Booking the most appropriate mode of interpretation** (in-person, phone, video - and both pre-scheduled or on-demand) is coordinated and clear for staff that need to use interpretation.
  - Interpretation is integrated into our standard electronic processes** (triage/assessment, tracking, internal and external referrals, etc).
  - We have assessed our internal technical capacity to ensure that all necessary technology is available** (e.g. phones, video tablets, apps, internet access).
  
- We have a budget for interpretation and staff are directed to use interpretation services whenever necessary and not to withhold needed interpretation services due to budget concerns.**

# TRAINING

**Training for staff and volunteers ensures that the entire organization has the awareness and tools to provide interpretation to everyone that needs it.**

- We provide regular training for our staff about interpretation.** Training is also available for relevant volunteers.
  - Interpretation is included in orientation training for all new staff regardless of position** to ensure staff know why interpretation is important, our interpretation policy and how they are able to access interpretation when needed. Training should highlight that trained interpretation reduces unnecessary medical testing or misdiagnoses, ensures informed consent for services, enhances client understanding, client satisfaction and service usage, ensures validity of contractual agreements and decreases service providers' exposure to risk and liability, and overall is cost effective for our organization and the health system.
  - More in-depth regular training is provided to any staff that are likely to interact with patients or the public (both health providers and administrative staff).** Training includes not only organizational interpretation policy and procedures but also:
    - Resources and written guidelines that are available to staff at anytime to reference as needed.**
    - Clear instructions/process for determining need for interpretation or how it will be offered.**
    - Procedures for contacting approved interpretation services.**
    - Training (i.e. "best practices") in working with interpreters.**
    - Encouragement from upper-management to use interpretation whenever needed.**
  - Refresher information on interpretation procedures is provided periodically to all staff and particularly those who interact with patients.**
  - Information for staff/volunteers about the procedures should be accessible where/when services would need to be accessed.**

# INTERPRETATION CONTRACT

**Most organizations do not have the ability to provide all needed interpretation in-house. Interpretation contracts ensure trained professional interpreters are available where and when they are needed.**

- We have a contract (through an external interpretation service or hired staff) for trained interpreters.**
  - Interpreters have had a minimum of 60 hours of training**, including professional conduct and appropriate role of interpreters, ethics (confidentiality and privacy of health information, informed consent), medical terminology and concepts, and interpreting skills. The contract should ideally include in-person interpretation and on-demand over-the-phone or video interpretation. When trained interpreters are hired by our organization we have position descriptions for interpreters that recognize the complexity of the interpreters role and details what is outside of their scope and reflects best practices in the sector.
  - An evaluation process for interpretation/interpreters is in place.**
  - Interpretation (across all modes of interpretation - in-person, phone, video) should be available for the majority of locally required languages.**

# COMMUNICATION TO PATIENTS

It is critical to communicate to patients/clients that interpretation is available whenever it is needed.

- We make it clear to our patients that interpretation is available to them and how they can access it.** This information about rights and services is available to patients as soon as they access our spaces or services (signage, intake paperwork, verbal communication). This information should be available in the top non-English languages in our community.
  - Our interpretation policy is available to the public** (on our website and possibly also posted in a public space for those who are not able to access electronic documents).
  - There is an interpretation complaint process for patients to pursue** which is clearly shared/posted/accessible. Complaints are dealt with/resolved in a timely manner, reported to senior management, with responsive follow-up with patients. Complaints can also be shared by internal staff or community partners/stakeholders.

## DATA

Organizations need to collect and use data to evaluate and improve interpretation usage and processes.

- We have data processes to track, analyze, report and plan for interpretation.**
  - We collect data regarding all use of interpretation, outcomes, languages and situations where interpretation is not possible/provided, etc.** (Records could include: Language of patients; # of interactions where an interpreter is needed; # of interactions where an interpreter is used; Type/mode of interpreter used (e.g. hospital employed, family member, community worker; phone/video/in-person trained interpreter); Cases where problems occurred due to language barriers; Cases where interpreter was not available; % of patients receiving language interpretation compared to % of individuals needing language interpretation in the broader community).
  - We regularly analyze the data about interpretation and check to ensure interpretation is being provided consistently.**
  - We have internal performance evaluations for interpretation and patient satisfaction surveys for interpretation service use.**

This resource incorporates on-the-ground experience and suggestions from users of interpretation as well as recent immigrant and community service providers. It was developed based on best practices detailed in a number of research reports and resources, including:

- “National Standards for Healthcare Equity: The Case for Provincial Interpretation Services”, National Newcomer Navigation Network (2022)
- “Environmental Scan of Interpretation Services in Kitchener, Waterloo, Wellesley, Wilmot, Woolwich”, KW4 Ontario Health Team – Interpretation Services Workstream (2021)
- “Interpretation Principles for Equitable and Accessible Services”, Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (2017)
- “Regional Policy for Interpretation Services - Language Access”, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (2016)
- “Language Barriers within the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (WRHA): Evidence and Implications”, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority (2004)

We are very thankful to the partners and individuals in the KW4 (Kitchener-Waterloo-Wellesley-Wilmot-Woolwich) Ontario Health Team area that provided input and the impetus for this resource. While local partners signed on to the KW4 OHT Interpretation Services Commitment Statement in 2021, further direction and support was requested regarding what a commitment to interpretation means in practice. This resource is a response to that need.

**If you have any questions about this checklist or interpretation best practices, contact the Waterloo Region Immigration Partnership (ImmigrationPartnership@regionofwaterloo.ca) or see the resources listed above.**