

Utilizing Interpreters To Communicate With Clients

Interpreters will undoubtedly play a critical role in helping your advocacy team communicate with linguistically and culturally-isolated communities. As you contemplate how to use interpreters, you must not lose sight of the need for both “linguistic” and “cultural” interpretation. It is all too easy to view the interpreter’s “role” as solely a translator between English and the particular language of the target community.

Perhaps the most common image of the interpreter in legal work is that of the court interpreter. Court interpreters faithfully translate what is said in one language to another and back again. However, interpreters can play a range of roles. These roles range from the so-called “Message Passer” to “Clarifier” to “Culture Broker” to “Advocate¹.” Court interpreters fit most closely in the Message Passer role.

In the COP project, a member of our team, Samnang Mam, provided interpreter services. Mam acted most frequently in the roles of “clarifier” and “culture broker,” rather than as “message passer” and “advocate.” This was possible because of Mam’s strong legal background, his life experience in Cambodia, and his judgment, maturity, and sensitivity. Far more than just a translator, Mam in his work as an interpreter served as a cultural bridge to our clients, enabling the COP team to provide high-quality legal representation.

Ideally, interpreters working with culturally and linguistically-isolated communities should serve both as translators and as cultural bridges between the target community and the advocacy team. Because the need for this expanded interpreter role may not be appreciated at the outset by the interpreter, by the larger advocacy team, or by the client, it is important to be explicit about the importance of the interpreter’s role in client advocacy on the advocacy team and plan accordingly.

¹ Robert W. Putsch, M.D., Language access in healthcare: Domains, Strategies, and Implications for Medical Education, <<http://www.xculture.org/resource/resources/category.cfm?Category=1>>.