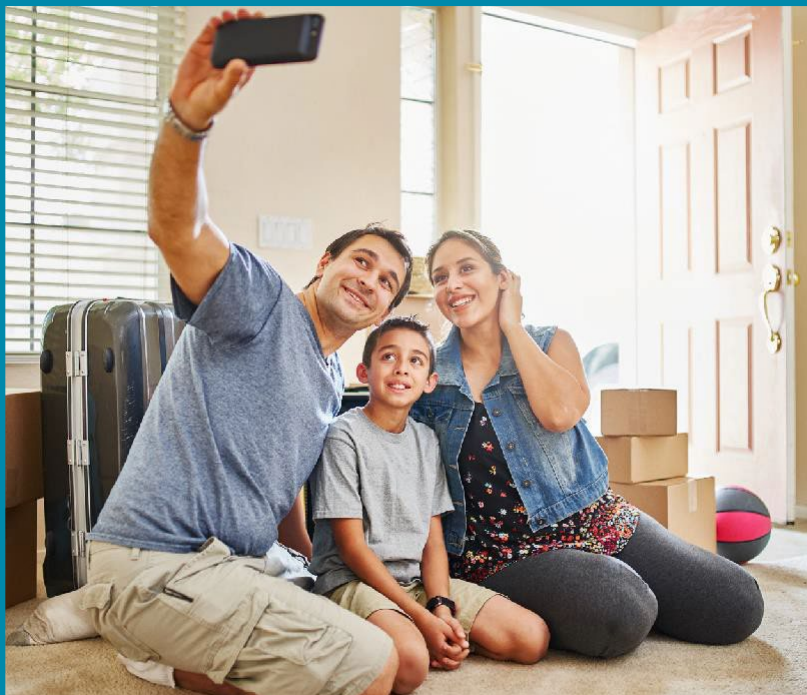




NORTH  
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Health & Human Services

## Resource Guide for Working with Interpreters and Translators



## REFUGEE SERVICES

September 2025

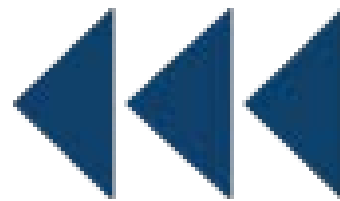


## Why this access guide exists

To fully participate in services, programs, or opportunities—whether through government agencies, business, health care providers, schools, or other organizations, individuals may need interpretation or translation support. This guide is designed to help ensure that everyone, regardless of the language they speak, has meaningful access when seeking assistance or engaging with services in North Dakota.

## Background information

Legal Obligations for Language Access Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, any organization that receives federal funding—such as government agencies, health care providers, schools, or nonprofits—is required to take reasonable steps to ensure that individuals with limited English skills can meaningfully access their programs, services, and activities. One essential step is partnering with qualified interpreters to communicate effectively and equitably. Interpreter services must be provided free of charge and without unnecessary delay. Staff responsible for providing these services should also follow their organization's established protocol for accessing interpretation.



## What is an interpreter? Who can serve as an interpreter?

An interpreter is a trained professional who helps people with limited English skills communicate clearly and accurately during appointments, meetings, or services.

Qualified interpreters may be:

- Certified in the medical or legal interpretation, or
- Trained community interpreters who follow national ethics and professional standards (such as those from National Council on Interpreting in Health Care or the courts)

While someone may speak more than one language, being bilingual alone doesn't qualify them to interpret in official settings. Using a friend or family member as an interpreter can lead to misunderstandings and compromise confidentiality, accuracy, and legal responsibility.

## Declined interpreter services

When someone with limited English skills, or their family, chooses not to use an interpreter, it's important to let them know that:

- Federal law requires meaningful language access through an interpreter
- Interpreter services should be provided free of charge and should be provided without delay

Even if declined, offering this information helps individuals make informed choices and protects service providers.



## Why someone might decline interpreter services

People with limited English skills may choose not to use an interpreter for a few understandable reasons:

One common concern is privacy, especially in smaller communities where the person might know the interpreter. This can lead to hesitation or fear that personal information could be shared. It's important to explain that interpreters are legally bound to maintain confidentiality, following laws such as Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and other privacy protections.

Another reason may be discomfort with unfamiliar people. The presence of both a service provider and an interpreter may feel overwhelming or intrusive, especially in sensitive or personal situations.

Reassuring the individual that the interpreter is part of the professional team, and is there to ensure accurate and respectful communication, can ease this discomfort.

To help reduce anxiety, staff can:

- Reassure the person that interpreters follow strict professional standards
- Acknowledge and validate any discomfort or hesitation
- Emphasize that the visit is focused on their needs
- Let them know how long the appointment will take



## Best practices

When communicating through an interpreter with someone who has limited English skills, service providers should:

- Use a person-centered approach.
- Focus on the person, their family and/or their legal representative, if applicable.
- Speak in a clear, natural tone and pace, interpreters will let you know if adjustments are needed.
- Make eye contact and direct body language toward the person with limited English skills, when culturally appropriate. In some cultures, eye contact can be seen as disrespectful, use your discretion.
- Always speak directly to the person, not to the interpreter, and use "I" and "you" to keep communication personal.
- Use plain language, jargon-free language, avoiding acronyms and explaining key terms or services.
- Pay attention to clarity and detail, balancing open- and closed- ended questions, and confirming understanding by restating or checking back.

## Interpreter

When working alongside an interpreter, service providers should expect them to:

- Provide conduit-style interpreting, speaking in first person ("I" and "you") and conveying messages exactly as spoken, without edits, summaries, or omissions.
- Interpret everything faithfully, including strong language, emotion, or culturally specific expressions, nothing should be softened or excluded.
- Mirror the speaker's tone and terminology, including any jargon or casual language used by the person with limited English skills.



## Best practices for before a visit

Before a visit, the service provider must:

- Find out the person's name and what language they speak.
- Ask if they or their family would feel more comfortable with a male or female interpreter.
- Let them know an interpreter has been scheduled at no cost and will be there on time.
- Give the interpreter a short summary of what the visit is about.

If possible, the service provider may also want to talk with the interpreter ahead of time to help them understand any cultural details that may affect the conversation.

Sometimes, an interpreter may act as a cultural guide if they feel it's needed. This helps make sure the person with limited English understands what is being said in a way that makes sense in their culture.

Before the visit, the service provider and interpreter should talk about:

- Any words or ideas that may be hard to explain. Some things don't translate easily between languages or cultures.
- How to describe the assessment and go over the person's choices for programs or services.
- Cultural norms that could affect how people speak or interact during the visit.

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## Best practices for during the visit and follow-up visits

When meeting with clients, the service provider should:

- Introduce everyone (including the interpreter) through the interpreter.
- Explain that federal and state laws protect the person's privacy. Tell them what "confidential" means, that their personal information will not be shared, and everyone must follow the law.
- Face the person with limited English skills during the conversation. The interpreter will sit where it works best for the situation and culture.
- Check if the person has trouble seeing, hearing, reading, or writing, or if they have a disability that makes communication harder.
- Ask about the person's and their family's reading and writing level to help decide the best way to share written materials.
- Let the person know that you will be taking notes to help remember what they say.
- Ask them to repeat what they heard to make sure they understood the information.
- Correct any information that isn't accurate.
- Ask if they need anything to be repeated or explained again.

### Note

- The interpreter should be in the same room as the person with limited English skills whenever possible.
- During an in-person visit, the interpreter should stay in the room with the person and the service provider.
- If remote, the interpreter should talk with the person briefly before the visit to review key info and answer questions.

## Best practices after the visit

After the visit, the service provider should:

- Offer translated written materials in the person's preferred language, if available.
- Go over what was discussed during the visit, including next steps or other important details.
- Share videos, pictures, or audio tools that help explain services, if available.
- Use simple and clear language to talk about both medical and non-medical topics.
- Give the person and their legal representative any required forms that explain their rights.

## Overview



Partnering with a qualified interpreter helps people with limited English skills get the information and services they need. Working well with interpreters puts each person at the center of care. Every culture and language has its own way of communicating. By using the tips in this guide, service providers can give everyone fair and clear access to services.

### Additional Resources

It may help to review:

- National Council on Interpreting in Health Care National Code of Ethics
- National Standards of Practice for Interpreters in Health Care

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