

Interpreting in the Immigration Settings: Focus Groups Summary

INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY

As part of the effort to gather insight from interpreters who work in immigration settings, two focus groups were conducted in the spring of 2013. An additional focus group was conducted in April 2012.

Altogether, a total of three focus groups met that included 9 interpreters. Four of the interpreters were certified deaf interpreters. Taken together, these individuals represent many years of experience relating to interpreting in immigration settings. Their insight and experience offer a nuanced view of this specialized interpreting setting as detailed in the following pages.

Here is a summary of the key findings from focus group participants:

- ❖ The degree of cross-cultural knowledge and sensitivity required when interpreting in immigration settings is extremely high. To the extent possible, interpreters should be familiar with the country the deaf consumer is from and how their laws and customs differ from the United States.
- ❖ A high-level of awareness about the immigration and naturalization system also is required to be effective interpreter in these settings. Significant rights are at stake, including citizenship status and possible deportation. Interpreters should have a clear understanding of the entire INS process in order to understand the implications of their interpreting task and ensure adequate communication.
- ❖ Interpreting assignments in the immigration setting will almost always require the use of a certified deaf interpreter. Accordingly, hearing interpreters should be adept at advocating for the inclusion of a CDI and at working with CDIs.
- ❖ Immigration is an all-encompassing area in which to practice. It is essential for interpreters to have knowledge about the origin country and culture of the deaf client.

METHODOLOGY & PROCEDURE

To fulfill our aim to secure a broad cross-section of interpreters who work in court settings through remote technology, we undertook 3 Focus Group meetings. It is worth noting that additional focus groups were solicited, but participation was low. One (1) meeting occurred face-to-face and two (2) meetings occurred via audio-conference. Solicitation of participants took place through the RID Legal Interpreter Member Section (LIMS), graduates of the UNC Legal Interpreter Training Program, and through the NCIEC network.

The face-to-face group meeting took place in Denver, Colorado as part of the 2012 ILI conference hosted by the NCIEC MARIE Center and LIMS. The two audio-conference meetings were with interpreter practitioners and court personnel from Arizona, California, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Each meeting lasted approximately 90 minutes. All participants were assured of confidentiality. Each meeting included a facilitator who fostered dialogue and posed questions from a focus group script that was approved through the IRB processes at the University of Northern Colorado and Northeastern University. The questions included in the script provide the framework for the focus groups findings report which follows.

Before each session, each group was informed of the purpose of the meeting:

“The overall goal of this particular NCIEC Focus Group endeavor is to identify and vet competencies and skills specific to interpreting in the immigration setting. To accomplish this goal, the NCIEC Legal Interpreting workgroup is engaging in a series of focus groups with interpreters from across the United States. The information gleaned from these events will assist the NCIEC Legal interpreting workgroup to: 1) identify a set of general competency domains for use in organizing the competencies and skills of interpreters working in immigration settings; 2) craft a draft set of competencies to be vetted by a broad base of stakeholders; 3) potentially translate the competencies into curricula or training modules to prepare interpreters to work in immigration settings; and most definitely to 4) identify practices that should be included in the Best Practices for ASL-English Interpreters working in Court and Law Enforcement Settings.”

The confidential notes from each meeting were compiled into the report we now present.

Key Findings: Conversations with Interpreter Practitioners and Court Personnel

General Questions:

Question 1: Can you tell me what two competencies you perceive as being most important for an interpreter working in immigration settings?

Participants recommended a number of competencies they felt were critical for interpreters working in the courts via remote technology. They include:

- ❖ Knowledge of and ability to use universal signs and gesturing.
- ❖ A high degree of interpersonal skills and cultural sensitivity.
- ❖ Flexibility and adaptability, especially in working with other interpreters whether spoken language interpreters or certified deaf interpreters.
- ❖ An in-depth knowledge of the immigration and naturalization system and the vocabulary unique to that field.
- ❖ Knowledge of the laws and customs of foreign countries.
- ❖ Empathy for others.
- ❖ The ability to see the big picture and how a particular assignment may fit into a broader picture of a deaf consumer trying to gain citizenship or deal with other naturalization issues.

Question 2: What has contributed to your current knowledge and skill related specifically to interpreting in immigration settings?

Most participants noted that their skills were developed primarily through on-the-job training. Some participants noted that foreign travel and personal experience had contributed to their understanding of both foreign cultures and the immigration process. Another significant contributing factor to the development of skills necessary to interpret in immigration settings was general experience in the courtroom. One participant noted that while waiting for in-court assignments, he often had the opportunity to observe other types of proceedings, including immigration related proceedings.

Question 3: Has your work as an interpreter in immigration settings involved other job duties?

One of the participants identified himself as the coordinator of interpreting services for his home court system. In this role, he had occasion to interpret immigration-

related proceedings. Two other participants noted that in their role as interpreters in immigration cases, they were tasked with preparing deaf clients for the INS test required for citizenship.

Knowledge Questions:

Question 4: What do you wish you knew before you began working in the immigration setting?

Many of the participants' responses to this question related to system knowledge pertaining to the immigration system. They noted that they wished they had known the overall immigration process, the structure and content of the swearing-in ceremony for citizenship, and familiarity with the myriad of documents used in the system. A few participants noted that they wished they were more familiar with geography and the culture of other countries. General knowledge of the legal system also was mentioned as important.

Many of the participants identified tools that they use to facilitate communication in immigration assignments, that they believed would be useful to new interpreters. Some of the items identified include props, maps, and pictures of a family or country flags. One participant noted that he always brings an iPad to immigration assignments in the event he needs to look up images or information about a deaf consumer's home country.

Question 5: To what degree do you feel that system-knowledge is important?

It was universally agreed among the participants that knowledge of the immigration system specifically and the court system generally was mandatory in order to perform effectively in immigration settings. Throughout the focus groups, it was repeatedly noted that it was critical for an interpreter to appreciate the significance of the proceeding to which s/he was assigned and how it could impact a deaf consumer's citizenship application or a deportation proceeding. One participant expressed a wish that an interpreter could accompany a deaf consumer through the entire process in order to maintain the integrity of the interpretation and ensure the deaf consumer's understanding.

Professional Practice Questions:

Question 6: Describe unique ethical situations you've encountered while working in the immigration setting.

The participants identified a couple of unique ethical situations that they encountered while interpreting in immigration settings. One participant related a story where she had interpreted for a family in domestic setting and later encountered one participant in the immigration setting. She noted that it was difficult not to bring that prior knowledge into the immigration assignment. This story hit on a theme echoed by a few of the participants that foreign born deaf individuals may have different expectations of an interpreter than American born deaf consumers. In a couple of instances, participants related stories where a foreign born deaf consumer in an immigration setting expected the interpreter to serve more as a consultant or helper based on their experience with interpreters in their home countries.

Question 7: In what immigration settings do you use sight translation?

Participants related that they frequently encountered the need to do sight translations in the immigration setting. Because of the nature of the process, deaf consumers are required to complete and fill out numerous documents, many of which need to be explained. Because the English skills of these consumers frequently are limited or non-existent, interpreters need to be familiar with the forms, when they are encountered in the process, and be able to explain them to the consumer.

Question 8: In what immigration related situations is it appropriate to use Deaf interpreters?

The use of CDIs in the immigration setting was among the first issue to be raised in every focus group. With the exception of the swearing in ceremony, participants opined that a CDI was required for almost every immigration assignment. CDIs are better able to facilitate communication with a visual gestural language. One participant noted it is ideal if a CDI from the same country as the deaf consumer can be hired for the assignment.

Question 9: In what immigration related settings do you use consecutive interpreting?

The participants noted that they relied almost exclusively on consecutive interpreting in immigration settings, with the exception of the swearing-in ceremony.

Skills Questions:

Question 10: Is the clientele encountered in immigration settings different now than in the past?

Some of the participants stated that they encountered many low functioning individuals in the immigration setting who had not only linguistic limitations, but also medical or mental health issues. One participant noted that he was more likely to rely on family members to facilitate communication when encountering these types of clients, as he would not do in other interpreting settings.

Question 11: What are the top five (5) ASL skills you believe essential for an interpreter working in the immigration setting?

The participants' responses to this question included:

- ❖ The use of classifiers and space in order to communicate in a more visual/gestural manner.
- ❖ Use of exaggerated facial expressions.
- ❖ The ability to interpret in order to illicit a narrow (yes/no) response.
- ❖ Use of a frozen register when interpreting swearing in ceremonies.
- ❖ Using techniques such as asking the deaf consumer to repeat what was signed in order to ensure understanding.