Working with Interpreters

When working with individuals who use a different language or communication modality, it is essential to understand the difference between a language assistant and a trained professional interpreter.

Each plays a distinct role in facilitating communication, but their qualifications, responsibilities, and ethical obligations differ significantly.

Language Assistant

A language assistant is typically someone who:

- Has some proficiency in two or more languages.
- May help with basic communication or informal conversations.
- Often lacks formal interpreter training or certification.
- Does not operate under a professional Code of Ethics or Standards of Practice.
- May unintentionally add, omit, or alter messages due to lack of training in neutrality or accuracy.

Examples: A bilingual staff member helping with a form, or a family member assisting during an appointment.

While their assistance can be helpful in casual settings, using a language assistant in professional or confidential contexts can risk miscommunication, confidentiality breaches, or bias.

Trained Professional Interpreter

A professional interpreter is a qualified and certified or accredited individual who:

- Has completed formal interpreter training and assessment.
- Works under a strict Code of Ethics ensuring accuracy, impartiality, and confidentiality.
- Is skilled in active listening, message transfer, and maintaining neutrality.
- Supports equitable access so all parties can communicate as if they shared a common language, including side conversations, and challenging language, i.e., obscenities.

Examples: Certified or accredited interpreters including medical/legal interpreters trained under national standards.

Key Takeaway

Using a trained professional interpreter ensures communication is clear, accurate, confidential, and ethically sound. A language assistant can be helpful in limited and informal situations, but should never replace a professional interpreter when accuracy, privacy, and liability are factors in the interpreted encounter.

Interpreter Role Statement

To deliver as faithfully as possible,
messages transmitted between individuals
who do not share a common language.