Engaging interpreters during coronavirus (COVID-19)

Guidance for Victorian Government funded agencies and programs

Interpreters play an essential role in ensuring that Victorians with limited English proficiency or who use sign language can access services and understand and participate meaningfully in the care they receive.

This guidance note advises Victorian Government funded agencies and services on how to safely and effectively engage interpreters during coronavirus (COVID-19). It adds to and temporarily supersedes applicable aspects of existing language services policies and guidelines.

This advice is current at 17 April 2020.

Video and phone interpreters should be used wherever possible

Remote (video and telephone) interpreting options should be used wherever possible to support essential service delivery in the context of coronavirus.

This protects the interpreter workforce, enables organisations to comply with physical distancing directives and helps to slow the spread of coronavirus.

Your language services contact or provider can advise how to switch to video or telephone interpreting in your service context. This may include use of an interpreter via telehealth, an on-demand telephone interpreter or a pre-booked telephone or video interpreter.

Language services providers have increased their technical capacities to deliver video and telephone interpreting at this time.

The policy that funded agencies and programs should not use family members or online auto-translation tools (such as google translate) to communicate with clients still applies.

It is expected that organisations will take all reasonable steps possible to enable remote interpreting. This could include reallocating or investing in communication equipment (such as laptops, phones and iPads), compensating staff working from home for increased data capacity requirements and amending booking procedures.

Onsite interpreting should only be used in exceptional circumstances

Where it is impossible to effectively convey or understand critical and time-sensitive information through a remote interpreter, onsite interpreting can be used as an exception. Organisations must plan and implement practices to reduce the risk of infection if onsite interpreting is required, including:

- nominating a person in the organisation to assess and approve requests for onsite interpreting
- providing clear advice to staff, clients and interpreters to enable the interpreter to maintain a physical distance of at least 1.5 metres from other people
- providing alcohol sanitisers or soap and opportunity to practise appropriate hand hygiene
- providing appropriate Personal Protective Equipment for interpreters in line with current Victorian Government guidance for your service setting
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- maintaining a hygienic workspace by regularly cleaning and disinfecting high touch surfaces and opening windows or adjusting air conditioning to enhance airflow where possible.


Organisations should be prepared to transfer onsite interpreter bookings to remote arrangements at short notice if conditions or directives change.

**Interpreters who feel unwell must stay at home**


**More information**

For more information about interpreters, speak to your usual language services contact, language services provider or department contact.

If you have any questions about the Department of Health and Human Services’ language services policies and guidelines, please email diversity@dhhs.vic.gov.au.