

## Translation & Interpretation Guidelines for Spanish Speaking Families

*People of Latin American, Mexican and Caribbean descent represent almost three dozen nations and more than half a billion people worldwide. Spanish is not the official language in every nation. Additionally, Spanish is a language expressed through a myriad of regional dialects and is as varied as English spoken in the United States, Ireland, Australia and the Bahamas. This document provides guidance to agencies and providers who work with predominantly Spanish-speaking families that are raising children with developmental disabilities.*

### TRANSLATION

- Translation is a professionalized skill set that requires more than the ability to write in two languages. Ideally documents should be translated into Spanish *by native Spanish speakers who are also familiar with the “lingo” of your profession.*
- Translation is more than a word-to-word conversion. **Effective translation considers context and tone, the audience and type of document they are creating.** Skilled translators practice **content translation** vs. literal translation and focus on translating the *meaning* of our message.
- Three terms to know:
  - ELL: English Language Learners
  - LEP: Limited English Proficiency
  - **Register:** Selecting the appropriate terminology and formality for the document that is being created. For example, the register for a judicial proceeding will be at a higher level than one for a PTA newsletter. Register is also important in interpretation work.
- At times, translators must address functional literacy issues in addition to LEP. Provide guidance to your translator on the functional literacy level your document should achieve.
- Often, Spanish requires a higher word count to accurately translate documents.
- People First Language is still developing in Spanish vocabulary. At the end of this document you can access **People First** terms translated by the Texas Developmental Disabilities Council.

#### ¿QUE ES LA DIFERENCIA?

Translators work with information in written form.

Interpreters work with spoken information.

### INTERPRETATION

Our US medical, social services and educational systems operate from the premise that strong family-provider partnerships improve child outcomes. We should model for all families partnering practice by asking relevant questions about home life, parents' observations about the child and what resources they believe may be helpful. It is important that we ask questions in a way that does not convey negative judgment about family decision-making

and circumstances and, certainly, we should take every opportunity to commend parents for good choices. Accurate, consistent, family-centered interpretation work is critical to each of these objectives.

- **How can I work with someone with LEP if I don't speak Spanish?** Before you encounter this situation, identify colleagues who are native Spanish speakers willing to serve as interpreters. Ideally, your organization employs persons whose part of their job duties include this work (even more ideal if they have a background in professional interpretation and translation). If not, use the best resources available and build extra time into your meeting. As it is with translation, interpretation often **takes longer to convey in Spanish what has been expressed in English**. Provide the parent with some notepaper and a pen so they can take notes in the language of their choosing.
- If possible, brief the translator before the meeting on expected content you need to solicit/share.
- Common courtesy is to make eye contact with the family as you speak instead of with the interpreter.
- After a family has shared information through an interpreter, restate what you understood so that any clarifications can be made.
- Debrief with your translator by asking for their feedback: Which terms or ideas were difficult to convey in Spanish? Are there any tips they can share with working with a particular Spanish-speaking culture?
- Be careful with the question: "Do you understand me?" It can connote you believe they lack the intellectual wherewithal to process your professional information. A better way to check for comprehension is to ask, "What are your questions about this information?" Or, repeat the information another way. Using an example of child's behavior or symptoms may be a useful illustration.

### TRANSCULTURAL COMPETENCY AND PROACTIVE DIALOGUES

As you likely know, the term "illegal immigrant" is pejorative. Citizenship is a matter of federal status and **being in the United States without appropriate documentation is a civil offense, not a criminal one**. That is why the term "undocumented person" is preferred. Nonetheless, our first question should always be to ourselves: "Why do I need this information?" Asking about a person's citizenship or residency status is **only appropriate when it affects service access**.<sup>1</sup>

Ask partnering agencies to provide guidance on how they specifically translate their agency name and services to avoid confusion when resource sharing with families.

Every family, imbued by their particular culture, have belief sets on how children with disabilities should be raised. For example, first generation families from developing nations may not know there are a myriad of US/OK services in place to assist a child with a disability. In the development of this document, professionals share that some Spanish-speaking families they work with believe the most compassionate choice is to keep a child with a disability close to home. We can honor these choices for the compassion they exhibit all the while teaching families they are additional resources in place for which they qualify.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that we, too, are operating from our own cultures – including our professional culture. That's why **transcultural competence is a higher goal than cultural competency**. Along with your colleagues, identify the cultural norms and expectations your agency and profession practices and be aware of them as you dialogue with families.

In some Latin American nations as well as Mexico, it can be considered disrespectful to question the choices and recommendations teachers, physicians, social workers, etc. have made. **Therefore, families may not ask questions not because they lack the English language skills but because they are deferring to your expertise.**

Again, we can model parent-provider partnering by encouraging their voiced participation and suggestions. We should always **remind parents they are both experts about and advocates for their child** and, as such, hold very pertinent information that can only enhance the services we develop.

Some families may face transportation challenges. We can overcome these by being willing to discuss matters over the phone and email. This works especially well when we set up actual appointment times to have these discussions.

As Oklahoma is a state of ever expanding diversity, we can **identify pathways where families can become involved** whether asking them to be homeroom parent, join your advisory committee or learn more about organizations such as the Oklahoma Family Network or Oklahoma Developmental Disabilities Council. Furthermore, we should share resource training opportunities with organizations that serve particular communities such as the OKC Latino Community Development Agency. Finally, put families in touch with other families who speak Spanish, are facing similar circumstances with their child and are good parent advocates.

Finally, terms such as “developmental delay” versus “developmental disability,” or “autism spectrum disorder” may be challenging to explain to families where these terms are not in common usage. Take advantage of native Spanish speakers to discover how these diagnoses are translated.

Some people of Latin, Hispanic, Caribbean or Mexican descent wish to be referred to by their family’s nation of origin or their nation of birth. For instance, if you were born in Oklahoma, you likely self-identify as “Oklahoman” or “US American.” You might find it odd for people from other parts of the world to refer to you as from an entire continent – “North American.” *As appropriate, friendly opportunities arise*, you may ask a parent where they consider home. As another example, Marcela may not wish to be called Hispanic as she self-identifies as Peruvian. However, if Marcela was born in Chandler, OK, her preference may be to be identified as Oklahoman or American

– regardless from where her family originated. However, technically, *anyone* born in North, Central or South America is “American” because that is a geographic, not national, marker. In practice, most US citizens refer to themselves as Americans.

#### DEVELOP A PARENT ALLY

If you are working with a parent with LEP, build their confidence by asking them to translate a technical term in Spanish. For example, you can ask them how to say “IV” in Spanish and they will teach you the word “suero” which is used more commonly by patients than “intravenoso.” Write this down and demonstrate that you, too, care about becoming a bilingual speaker.

#### HIRING PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS

The average national salary for a translator is \$34,600 annually. In our state, bilingual persons often become the *de facto* office/agency translator and interpreter. While this may be all that your organization can support now, advocate with administration for bilingual staff to take actual translation/interpretation coursework as an investment in your collective work.

Furthermore, there may be opportunities to share translators/interpreters amongst agencies.

Multiple Oklahoma colleges and universities offer degree programs in foreign languages but their academic focus is language proficiency which is not the same as translation and interpretation skill sets. **Well-trained, professional translators hold a certificate or college degree in translation/interpretation studies as well as work experience.** Two examples are:

- OSU-OKC offers an applied associate degree in technical, medical as well as legal English-Spanish translation and interpretation.
- SNU offers an undergraduate program called English-Spanish Translation Studies

Consider contacting foreign language department on nearby campuses to see who they recommend to meet your translation and interpretation needs. Professors often have service requirements to meet tenure obligations and may be willing to sit on committees or consult.

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<sup>i</sup> "Illegal alien" is not a legal term. An alien is defined as anyone who is not a citizen or national of the United States. However, "illegal alien" is not a legal term in the Immigration and Nationality Act. For some, the use of the term "illegal alien" is likely based on a misconception that an immigrant's very presence in the United States is a criminal violation of the law. While the act of entering the country without inspection is a federal misdemeanor, and for repeat offenders could be a felony, the status of being present in the United States without a visa is not an ongoing criminal violation.  
From: <http://nohumanbeingsillegal.com/Home.html>

A full copy of **Spanish People First Language** can be found at the:  
[Texas Developmental Disabilities Council](#).  
Click on the PDF link and a two page English/Spanish document will appear.

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