



# Strategies for Supporting Bicultural and Bilingual Staff

It is important to provide meaningful access to services for all survivors, including taking steps to ensure access for individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP). A staff that reflects the languages and cultures in the community is best positioned to provide meaningful access to advocacy services for individuals with LEP. The advantage of having bilingual advocates is that they can speak directly to survivors and can more readily foster open communication and build trust with a survivor. This may enable them to determine survivor safety more quickly, inform them of services available, and provide effective advocacy and support.

Many programs have only one or two bilingual staff members responding to a large percentage of the survivors with LEP who utilize their services. Some programs compound this inadequate staffing decision by asking bilingual staff to also act as interpreters for survivors with LEP working with other advocates, or others outside their programs, such as law enforcement or social services agencies. Often, bilingual staff are asked to take on many more duties across the agency (e.g., answering hotline calls, translating materials, running bilingual support

---

**A staff that reflects the languages and cultures in the community is best positioned to provide meaningful access.**

---

groups and accompanying survivors to court or social service appointments, among other things). Bilingual advocates in these types of situations often report feeling isolated and burned out since they bear a disproportionate burden of the language access and outreach responsibilities (Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network, n.d.). Additionally, bilingual advocates are rarely compensated for these additional tasks. This can result in low morale and high turnover, and can have a negative impact on the agency's ability to provide effective services.

## When an Advocate is Asked to Interpret

*(Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network, 2015)*

The role of the advocate is different than that of the interpreter. Having a bilingual advocate who speaks a survivor's native language is one of the most effective ways to conduct advocacy with survivors with LEP. However, bilingual advocates, in most cases, are not trained interpreters. Serving as an interpreter requires a specific set of skills and specialized training. Bilingual advocates who are not trained interpreters should not try or be expected to interpret for survivors with LEP who are communicating with law enforcement, court personnel, or other service providers. Advocates who are not trained interpreters usually end up summarizing or paraphrasing meaning, which can be problematic because it inevitably leads to miscommunication between law enforcement, the courts, and the survivor.

In addition, the roles of an advocate and of those of an interpreter are not only different, but can conflict. An interpreter is supposed to only state exactly what the survivor and other parties say. For example, if the survivor does not understand the question or the answers provided, the interpreter cannot provide an explanation or other support for the survivor. Furthermore, if an advocate is asked to serve as an interpreter, and consequently as the mouthpiece for law enforcement, the court, and possibly even for the perpetrator, this can create confusion for the survivor, undermine the relationship of trust with the advocate, and compromise confidentiality. Additionally, in a courtroom scenario, the neutrality of the advocate/interpreter can be called into question by the opposing party, which can complicate or undermine the court process.

## Bilingual Advocate vs. Interpreter

*(Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network, 2015)*

The role of the advocate is distinct from that of an interpreter. Acting as an interpreter compromises the advocate's role, the program's services, and potentially the survivor's confidentiality.

**When a bilingual advocate is available, assess whether there is an additional need for an interpreter by asking the following questions:**

Is this an activity the advocate would engage in regardless of the languages spoken?

Is the advocate acting as a language conduit between the survivor and a third party, thereby acting as an interpreter rather than as an advocate?



Bilingual advocates are often asked to act as interpreters in situations outside the scope of providing advocacy. When an advocate is working with a survivor, they may accompany the survivor to other social service agencies to help guide them through the different systems. Some of these agencies may assume that since a bilingual advocate is accompanying a survivor with LEP, the agency does not need to provide an interpreter. It is important to keep in mind that other service

systems that receive federal funding have their own obligations to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and take reasonable steps to provide meaningful access to individuals with LEP.

Although the advocate's role is to support the survivor in their process of accessing services, acting as an interpreter for other systems and professionals is inappropriate. When a bilingual advocate acts as an interpreter for these other service providers, the following issues may arise:

### **Role Conflict**

For example, if an advocate goes to a meeting between a survivor with LEP and a child welfare worker, and the child welfare agency does not provide an interpreter, the advocate may be asked to serve as the interpreter for the child welfare worker. An interpreter is never supposed to provide an explanation on their own to a survivor or have direct conversation with the individual for whom they are providing interpretation services, but rather only directly interpret the communication between that individual and other parties. As a result, the advocate is no longer able to effectively serve as an advocate for the survivor and has switched from serving the survivor to serving the child welfare agency. Additionally, this would undermine the role of the advocate if they are trying to "wear both hats." It can create confusion for the survivor regarding the role of the advocate and whether they represent the agency or can be trusted to serve as a confidential advocate.

### **Barriers to Accessing Services**

Interpreters have a unique set of skills that allow them to accurately transmit information between two or more parties. Advocates without this training risk misinterpreting and misrepresenting what the survivor and other service provider are trying to communicate.

### **Compromises to Confidentiality**

Blurring the lines between advocate and interpreter by assuming both roles could lead to misunderstandings of confidentiality requirements under the Violence Against Women Act and Pennsylvania state law. For example, when using an interpreter the third party should expect to know all that is being communicated between an interpreter and an individual with LEP, even if it is a side conversation between the interpreter and the survivor with LEP. As a result, this could undermine confidentiality. Additionally, the survivor may be uncertain of future ability to have confidential conversations with the advocate or whether all information will be shared with the agency or entity for which the advocate was interpreting.

---

## **Blurring the lines between advocate and interpreter could lead to misunderstandings.**

---

Additional critical issues to consider include survivor safety and setting negative precedents. Although it should be avoided if at all possible, if it is necessary for a bilingual advocate to provide emergency interpretation, these limitations and barriers should be clearly explained to the third party and the individual with LEP before interpretation begins. Additionally, it should be communicated to the third party that for future interactions they should make arrangements to have a neutral, trained interpreter present to serve in that role so as not to undermine the role of the advocate.



**Bilingual advocates are often asked to act as interpreters in situations outside the scope of providing advocacy.**

**It is important to keep in mind that bilingual staff members are not necessarily interpreters or translators:**

- Interpreters must state exactly what the survivor and other parties say. Advocates who are not trained interpreters usually end up summarizing, paraphrasing, or explaining, which is problematic and inevitably leads to miscommunication between the survivor and the third party.
- Serving as an interpreter, particularly for outside agencies, undermines their main role as an advocate for the survivor. For example, an interpreter cannot interact directly with or provide supports to the survivor, not even to explain a question the survivor may not understand.
- Similarly, serving as an informal interpreter undermines survivor confidentiality. For example, the third party expects to know all that is being communicated, even if it is a side conversation between the advocate and the survivor.
- If an agency intends for a bilingual staff member to serve as an interpreter or translator, they should provide appropriate training and compensation, and the staff member's job duties should be clearly defined. Creating guidelines for bilingual staff in the organization's language access plan is a great way to ensure that bilingual staff are supported. Learn more about developing a language access plan below.

## Supporting Bilingual Staff Through Language Access Planning

It is important to provide meaningful access to services for all survivors, including taking steps to ensure access for individuals with LEP. Even if an organization has advocates who are bicultural and bilingual, the organization should develop a comprehensive language access plan to ensure that all staff are able to serve all survivors, regardless of whether or not there are staff members who share the survivor's language and/or culture. Below are some of the issues that should be addressed in a language access plan:



Even if an organization has several bilingual staff to cover each shift and many written materials and services are language accessible, there will still be times when language will be a barrier for survivors with LEP to meaningfully access services.



The organization should develop clear policies and practices about when and how bilingual advocates or friends and family of the survivor should (and should not) provide interpretation for other staff members or other service providers. Children shall not be used as interpreters for counseling sessions, intake, group sessions, or other contacts with adult significant others receiving subcontract-required services.



It is important to develop policies and educate all staff on guidelines about the appropriate ways to engage with, and access the use of bilingual advocates' skills. This will help improve the morale and retention of bilingual staff.



As an organization increases meaningful language access, this may increase the number of individuals with LEP seeking services at that agency. The agency should periodically review whether there is a need to hire additional bilingual staff and whether to contract with interpreters to provide additional support services.



To improve the organization's long-term language accessibility and boost staff skills and retention, consider offering a pay differential for bilingual staff that recognizes and values these additional skills.



Consider requests for language development as part of professional development. Ask if staff members have interest in achieving greater proficiency in a language; if so, consider allowing staff to use work time to enhance their language skills, or supporting staff interested in an immersion experience with additional paid time off.



Ensure that the organization's language access plan includes protocols and practices for providing meaningful access for survivors with LEP who speak less commonly encountered languages, and a plan for training all staff in how to serve these survivors.

## Thank You

Thank you to our partners at the Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network for authoring this resource.

**Jose Juan Lara, Jr., MS**, has been involved in the movement against gender violence since 1999 and has facilitated workshops at national, state, and local conferences on crisis intervention, systems advocacy for victims of family and sexual violence, and LGBTQ victims of interpersonal violence. Prior to coming to the National Latin@ Network, Jose Juan was the Senior Victim Services Program Specialist for Texas Advocacy Project in Austin; Director of Legal Services for the Family Crisis Center, Inc. in Harlingen; Case Manager Supervisor/Volunteer Coordinator for Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Cameron and Willacy Counties; and Legal Advocate Program Coordinator for Friendship of Women, Inc. in Brownsville. Jose Juan serves on the Board of allgo, a statewide queer people of color organization (originally, Austin Latina/o Lesbian and Gay Organization) and a consultant for Office for Victims of Crime Training and Technical Assistance Center. Jose Juan holds a Master's degree in Public Safety with specialization in Criminal Justice.

**Lumarie Orozco, MA**, is a community psychologist and project manager for the National Latin@ Network for Healthy Families and Communities, a project of Casa de Esperanza. Lumarie's areas of expertise and interest include the development and implementation of culturally responsive interventions that support the health and well-being of Latin@ communities, ensuring meaningful language access for limited English proficient individuals, supporting non-culturally specific organizations in developing culturally responsive service responses through a process of organizational assessment and development, community engagement and leadership development, and Latin@ youth development and advocacy. Lumarie works with nationally recognized colleagues and other national technical assistance providers to inform the practices of the country's most innovative, community based and dynamic non-profit organizations to achieve dramatic social change in the fields of dating and domestic violence, and sexual assault. Currently, Lumarie provides training and strategic technical assistance services to the Office of Violence Against Women's Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention Initiatives (DVHPI), which seek to enhance service response to victims of domestic violence at high risk for lethality.

## References

- Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network. (2015). *Increasing language access in the courts tool kit*. Retrieved from [http://nationallatinonetwork.org/images/files/Increasing\\_Language\\_Access\\_in\\_Courts\\_ToolKit\\_Eng\\_FINAL.pdf](http://nationallatinonetwork.org/images/files/Increasing_Language_Access_in_Courts_ToolKit_Eng_FINAL.pdf)
- Casa de Esperanza: National Latin@ Network. (n.d.). *Bicultural and bilingual staff*. Retrieved from <https://nationallatinonetwork.org/lep-toolkit-strategies/bilingual-staff>
- Civil Rights Act of 1964, Pub.L. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241 (1964). [Latinas The Impact of Immigration and Language Access FINAL.pdf](#)



© Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape 2019. All rights reserved.

[www.pcar.org](http://www.pcar.org)