



## WORKING WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT PERSONS AND FOREIGN-LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS IN THE COURTROOM

— A Bench Card for Judges —

### The Law on Foreign-Language Interpreters for Participants in Court Proceedings

Under Federal law, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d, and Georgia statutory law, case law, and Supreme Court rules, Georgia courts are required to provide qualified foreign-language interpreters to participants in court proceedings who are limited English proficient (LEP). They must provide these services when necessary to ensure effective communication by and with LEP participants. LEP participants can include litigants, witnesses, and spectators. Court proceedings include all court services, programs, and activities. LEP participants:

- Cannot be required to arrange or pay for their own interpreters, nor can their attorneys be required to do so;
- Must be provided an interpreter for any criminal or civil proceeding;
- Can waive their right to an appointed interpreter if the waiver is in writing and is approved by the court, and can revoke that waiver at any time;
- Do not waive their right to an appointed interpreter simply because they do not request one;
- Do not lose the right to an appointed interpreter because they speak or understand some English.

### Identifying the Language of LEP Participants

LEP participants in court proceedings can self-identify their preferred language by using a Language Identification Guide: <https://georgiacourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Language-Identification-Flash-Card.pdf>

### Determining the Need for a Foreign-Language Interpreter

An interpreter shall be appointed when the decision maker, which would include the judge, magistrate, special master, commissioner, hearing officer, arbitrator, neutral, or mediator, determines, after an examination of

- The party cannot understand and speak English well enough to participate fully in the proceedings and to assist counsel; or
- The witness cannot speak English so as to be understood directly by counsel, the decision maker, and/or the jury.

### Sample Questions to Assess the English Proficiency of a Participant

- How did you learn English?
- Please tell me about your native country.
- Describe some of the things you see in this courtroom.

After examination, the decision maker should state his or her conclusion on the record, and the case file should be clearly marked and data entered electronically to ensure that an interpreter will be present when needed in any subsequent proceeding.

In some instances, the decision maker may appoint an interpreter based solely on a participant's written or verbal request.

Courts should encourage participants to alert the court to their need for an interpreter and the language needed as soon as possible so the court has adequate time to locate a qualified interpreter. Participants should not be required to wait to make their first request for an interpreter in person in court.

### Finding a Qualified Foreign-Language Interpreter

The Supreme Court Committee on Court Interpreters (Committee maintains an online database of state-licensed interpreters that can be searched by language and by county, at [ocp.georgiacourts.gov](http://ocp.georgiacourts.gov)

Interpreters licensed through the Committee have fully satisfied rigorous examinations, training, and court observation, and have undergone background checks.

If there is no interpreter on the registry for the language you need, contact the Committee at 404-463-3808 or [gcr@georgiacourts.gov](mailto:gcr@georgiacourts.gov).

### Credentials of Foreign-Language Interpreters

Courts should make a diligent effort to appoint a "Certified" interpreter. If a Certified interpreter is unavailable, a "Conditionally Approved" or "Registered" interpreter should be given preference. If the court is unsure of an interpreter's qualifications, the court should *voir dire* the interpreter:

### Sample Voir Dire to Assess an Interpreter's Qualifications

- “What training/credentials do you have?”
- “What is your native language?”
- “State some canons from the Code of Professional Responsibility for Interpreters.”
- “How many times have you interpreted in court?”
- “What types of cases have you interpreted?”

If, after a diligent search by the court, a Certified or other licensed interpreter is unavailable, the court should weigh the need for immediacy in conducting a hearing without a licensed interpreter or with an unlicensed interpreter or telephonic interpreter, against the potential compromise of due process, or the potential of substantive injustice, if the quality of interpreting is inadequate. Failure to appoint a qualified interpreter or no interpreter at all can result in reversible error on appeal.

If the court determines that the use of a non-licensed interpreter is warranted, refer here. When a non-professional interpreter is used, the court should personally verify the interpreter's basic understanding of his or her role, on the record.

### Additional Considerations When Selecting Foreign-Language Interpreters

Courts should consider other factors to determine whether an interpreter is suited to work in court. For example:

- The interpreter's prior professional and/or social contact or association with the LEP participants;
- Education, professional training, and formal legal training completed by the interpreter; and
- The types of court proceedings in which the interpreter has experience.

Courts should also consider that:

- The ability to speak a foreign language does not equal the ability to interpret nor qualify a person to interpret;
- Relatives or friends of LEP parties, witness, judges, or attorneys should not interpret court proceedings. Minor children should never be used to interpret;
- Court personnel or bilingual staff should not function as interpreters unless they are Certified and employed as staff interpreters;
- Court interpreting is strenuous, so it is advisable to schedule regular breaks. Sometimes, appointing more than one interpreter may be necessary for proceedings expected to last more than two hours;
- The interpreter is a neutral party whose sole job is to facilitate communication by interpreting everything said during the proceedings;

- The interpreter cannot participate in any capacity other than as the interpreter;
- The interpreter may not provide advice or explanations about what was said or done in court;
- The interpreter is a conduit for information exchange, and not a direct participant in the proceeding.

### Recording the Proceedings

Where a Certified interpreter is used, no audio or audiovisual record of the non-English testimony is required, but the court may authorize the making of a recording.

Where a non-Certified (e.g., Conditionally Approved, Registered, or unlicensed) interpreter is used, the court shall make an audio or audiovisual recording of any non-English testimony. This recording shall become part of the record of the proceeding: <https://ocp.georgiacourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2020/06/Supreme-Court-of-Georgia-COI-Rules-and-Regulations-1.pdf>

### Foreign-Language Interpreter's Ethics

All Georgia-licensed court interpreters are subject to the Code of Professional Responsibility for Interpreters: <https://najit.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/NAJITCodeofEthicsFINAL.pdf>

### Foreign-Language Interpreter's Oath

The court should administer an oath prior to the start of court proceedings. Below is an example:

*“Do you solemnly swear or affirm that you will faithfully interpret from (the foreign language) into English and from English into (the foreign language) the proceedings before this court in an accurate manner to the best of your skill and knowledge?”*

### Resources

#### Georgia Supreme Court Rule on Interpreters

<https://ocp.georgiacourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2020/06/Supreme-Court-of-Georgia-COI-Rules-and-Regulations-1.pdf>

**National Association of Judiciary Interpreters & Trans-lators Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities** <https://najit.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/NAJITCodeofEthicsFINAL.pdf>

**Federal Interagency Website on Limited English Proficiency**

[www.lep.gov/](http://www.lep.gov/)