

Q&A: 3 common questions about getting an interpreter

You asked, so we are answering three common questions about accessing interpreting services. The Provincial Language Service, a program of PHSA, provides consolidated interpreting services for all Lower Mainland health authorities. For more information about PLS services, visit <http://www.phsa.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/interpreting-services> or email lmis@phsa.ca.

Q: Sometimes I have trouble getting an interpreter for the date or time I want. Why don't you get more interpreters?

A: We add interpreters to our pool of contractors on an ongoing basis across the Lower Mainland for a variety of languages depending on demand. Unfortunately, there is a limited supply of qualified interpreters, just as there is a limited supply of nurses, physicians, technologists and other health care professionals.

Interpreters are more than just people who speak more than one language. Interpreters are language experts and they not only require proficiency in English and a specific language, but also in interpreting. When we source interpreters, we look for individuals who have completed post-secondary programs in interpreting. These post-secondary programs teach interpreting skills, ethical and professional standards and critical thinking skills.

For some languages, such as many refugee languages, no post-secondary interpreting programs exist. Therefore, interpreters must complete a community-based training program when available or at a minimum, our online training course, before being able to interpret for us. Our ability to source, screen, train and orient new interpreters depends on the availability of resources.

Q: Why do you ask me to be flexible with my appointment start time or appointment length?

A: When we schedule an interpreter for an appointment, we also look at all the other interpreting requests for that same language in a given area. For example, when we schedule a Cantonese interpreter for a clinic at Vancouver General Hospital, we look at it in the context of all Cantonese requests for the VGH campus and surrounding facilities, like the BC Cancer Agency's Vancouver Centre and the Centre for Disease Control.

It is impossible for everyone to have an interpreter at the same time, because there is a limited supply of qualified interpreters, just as there is a limited supply of nurses, physicians,

technologists and other health care professionals. Therefore, we may ask you to change your appointment time or appointment length to fit within the interpreter's schedule.

We recognize that not every appointment can be flexible in this way, but some can be, so we try to present you with all available options.

Q: Why does the interpreter sometimes have to leave, even though the appointment is not over? How do I finish my appointment without the interpreter?

A: If your appointment goes over the scheduled end time and your interpreter's schedule allows him or her to stay, then s/he will stay longer to complete the appointment.

However, due to high demand, interpreters often have appointments that are scheduled close together or back to back. In these cases, the interpreter will not be able to stay if your appointment goes over the scheduled end time. If the interpreter cannot stay past the scheduled end time, s/he will let you know before or during the appointment.

Fortunately, you have other options if your interpreter cannot stay. For the quickest access to an interpreter, we can provide you with a phone interpreter to complete the rest of the appointment. Simply call our office and we will connect you to an interpreter over the phone within minutes. This option works best when:

- There are two or three people in the conversation
- The rest of the appointment will be 30 minutes or shorter
- The conversation is relatively uncomplicated

If you cannot use a phone interpreter, call our office and we will try to find another interpreting option for you.